



**Feminism and the
Mastery of Nature**
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FEMINISM FOR TODAY



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treatment as an instrument for the achievement of human satisfactions.

It is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold most strongly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability. The mechanical philosopher Robert Boyle notes that 'the veneration with which men are imbued for what they call nature has been a discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God: for many have not only looked upon [control], as an impossible thing to compass, but as an impious thing to attempt' (Boyle 1744:363). As Boyle indicates, power over nature, considered as a powerful other, was often previously seen as neither desirable nor possible.³

The view of nature as *terra nullius* available for annexation, as empty, passive and without a value or direction of its own, often underlies and is implicit in early liberal arguments for the legitimacy of private property. For example, Locke's famous argument in the second treatise justifying private property in terms of the 'mixing' of one's own labour with natural resources in the state of nature, provides just such a licence for annexation (Locke 1960:329). The argument assumes not only that the natural world is 'unowned' (unless so mixed with labour) by other humans, but also that it does not 'own' itself. It assumes that nature is a nullity, without value or direction on its own account, and that these things are added in by human labour. Without such a nullity assumption, the 'mixing' analogy is not at all convincing and does not show that nature is simply available to the mixer. For why should the addition of labour make it possible to simply annexe the natural world, without constraints other than those arising from the needs of other humans? If nature has creativity, value and significance on its own account, the result of 'mixing' would be more like the mixing of one person's labour with another's or with what another person owns. There would be thus no case for simple appropriation, for claiming the 'mixed' human labour to be dominant in giving property rights and overriding the claim of the item to be 'its own thing', with its own agency, significance and value. As Vandana Shiva points out, Locke's argument provides for those elite groups whose work counts as real 'labour' a similar licence for annexation by defining as 'nature' the work of marginalised groups, especially women and the colonised.⁴

DESCARTES AND MIND/NATURE DUALISM

A licence for the annexation of nature is provided by Cartesian mind/nature dualism, the close associate of Cartesian mind/body dualism. As

Margaret Dauler Wilson (1978:199.) notes, many philosophical commentators on Descartes show some confusion about the exact content of Cartesian dualism. Cottingham, for example, seems to think that it lies simply in the fact that Descartes draws a distinction between mind and body (1986:119). I shall argue that the dualism of Descartes does not lie in this distinction itself but in the way it is treated in terms of hierarchical realms. For both mind/nature and closely related mind/body distinctions, dualism emerges in Descartes' thought through radical exclusion, through relational definition (defining nature as lack), and through instrumentalisation and homogenisation, as well as through other features of dualism. For the mind/body distinction, dualism emerges especially in the radical exclusion of mind and body and the elimination of mind/body overlap and continuity. This is done through the creation of the polarised conceptions of disembodied mind and mindless body which Gilbert Ryle happily described in the phrase 'the ghost in the machine'.⁵

Descartes is plainly the heir of the Platonic and rationalist flight from and devaluation of the body, nature and the feminine. Like these earlier rationalists he defines the real self as alien to the body and nature, and treats the body in the fashion of a devalued and denied dependency. But these objectives of human/nature dualism are now achieved by a different route, in terms of mind and consciousness, rather than in terms of the earlier conception of human virtue. Descartes' account dispenses with the subtleties of the divided self, of the higher and lower parts of the soul as elaborated by medieval philosophers, and the division between the rational and irrational parts of the soul becomes (as in early Platonic thought) a division between mind and body. The Aristotelian conception of soul was much wider than that of mind, rationality or thought, the special faculty which dealt with truth. For Descartes, non-rational areas which cannot be reduced to thought are no longer part of the soul but instead pertain to the body (Lloyd 1984:45).

Descartes shifts the basis of mind from rationality to consciousness. But it is a very special account of consciousness which continues to make reason its *de facto* linchpin. The shift to consciousness contributes to deepening the human/nature dualism in a number of ways. Rationality can be present in the world in different ways and degrees; for example, as rational principles in nature, as in the Aristotelian form/matter distinction. The boundary of rationality in this form does not necessarily coincide with the human, and for Aristotle the boundary of soul is much wider than the human. Descartes is anxious to reject this Aristotelian account and to dispense with any explanation which requires mind or teleology outside the human sphere. Animals are 'animal-machines' devoid of thought, the body is 'pure extension', formed 'without being

composed of any other matter' and 'without putting into it at the beginning any rational soul' (Rodis-Lewis 1978:156). The soul does not inform the body as its principle nor could it have emerged from it, but requires a separate and express act of creation by God, who then inserts it into the body in the case of humans, but omits it in the case of animal-machines (Descartes 1952:149).

The account of mind in terms of consciousness allows for no Aristotelian fusion and for no continuity. On Descartes' account, mind, the inner mechanism which explains the operations of the mechanically conceived human body, also divides humans utterly from the rest of nature, from which mind is totally absent. The mind, and its major feature consciousness, becomes an on/off concept—it is either fully present or it is not present at all. There is no room for distinctions of kind or for differences of degree. Either something 'has a mind' or it does not, and having a mind requires consciousness or 'thought'.

Cartesian consciousness or thought is a confused amalgam of different psychological concepts—pondering, calculating, willing, perception and heeding concepts, such as attention and noticing, are all run together. This amalgamation is important in Descartes' construction of dualism. The word 'thought', writes Descartes, covers 'all the operations of the soul' (1973:II, 36). 'Willing, understanding, imagining and feeling are simply different ways of thinking, which all belong to the soul.'⁶ Thought includes not only 'meditations and acts of the will, but even the functions of sight and hearing, and the resolving on one movement rather than another' (1973:II, 36). But since some of these features (e.g. calculative functions, pondering) were taken to be peculiarly human, this amalgamation facilitated the conclusion that the whole set of operations which could be called thinking was similarly confined to the human. Certainly the term 'thought' or consciousness *could* be redefined to include in a democratic fashion the whole gamut of broadly psychological activity—imagination, sensation, emotion, as well as intellectual functions. But this is not what Descartes actually does, for the intellectual functions and reason retain in a *de facto* fashion their privileged place in the definition of selfhood (*sum res cogitans*) and in the account of mind, and are now deployed to deprive the non-human sphere of any claim to any of the other aspects of mind. Thus Descartes does not argue that animals have sensation, and therefore must think, but instead that they cannot think (reason), and therefore must lack true sensation.

The theme of the need for hyperseparation between human nature and animal nature (and nature more generally) is one Descartes sees as of supreme importance. He writes:

For next to the error of those who deny God, an error which I have,

I think, already sufficiently refuted, none is more effectual in diverting weak minds from the straight path of virtue than that of imagining the soul of the brutes to be of the same nature as ours.

(Descartes 1952:149)

But at first glance it would seem that a theory of mind as consciousness must provide some basis for a recognition of human continuity with other sentient beings. So one problem for Descartes, given his identification of mind with consciousness, is what to do about human characteristics such as perception, experiential characteristics, sensation and emotionality which appear crucially to involve the body, and also to be shared with animals. Descartes solves this problem for the Differential Imperative by a distinction very similar to that Plato makes between understanding music as the rational theory of intervals (mathematical harmonics) and music as 'tormenting instruments', between true knowledge of music as given by reason as opposed to the inferior or illusory understanding of music associated with the body, the playing of instruments and the sense of hearing.

Descartes obtains radical exclusion between mind and body through an account of perception which distinguishes between sensations construed as modes of thought, and sensations construed as modes of matter or body. Sensation is said to consist of two parts, the impression made by an external object on the organ of sense, and the mind's awareness or contemplation of this impression. Only the second is given the status of sensation proper, sensation as part of the self, of the 'I', for 'certainly I seem to see, to hear, to feel heat. This cannot be false; this is strictly what in me is called sensing; but this is strictly speaking nothing else but to think.'⁷ Thus it is sensation construed as a type of consciousness or thought which gives knowledge and pertains to the subject 'I', and not sensation as a bodily phenomenon. Descartes writes: 'For I now know that, properly speaking, bodies are cognised not by the senses or by the imagination, but by the understanding alone. They are not thus cognised because seen and touched, but only insofar as they are apprehended understandingly' (Meditation 11: Descartes 1952:211). This not only frees thinking, and the experience of sensation, from any commitment to the body, and makes possible the dualistic polarisation between thinking mind and mechanical body. It also means that animal sensation can be construed along completely mechanistic lines as purely bodily on the (somewhat question-begging) grounds that animals lack the capacity for thought. The latter thesis, as we have seen, results from running together, into the notion of 'thought', the different notions of awareness, noticing, consciousness, judgement, pondering, practical and formal reasoning. This makes it possible to move from the claim that animals lack the capacity for reasoning (itself construed narrowly as

calculation) to the claim that they lack consciousness or awareness. This last claim of course is clearly false if we understand awareness or consciousness in the more normal sense, as including sensation and sense perception itself.

Descartes' main strategy for achieving hyperseparation and eliminating human/animal and mind/body continuity was then to reinterpret the notion of 'thinking' in such a way that those mental activities which involve the body, such as sense perception, and which appear to bridge the mind/body and human/animal division, become instead, via their reinterpretation in terms of 'consciousness', purely mental operations, 'modes of thinking' (Descartes 1973:VII, 81). Sensations proper now fall under the heading of 'thinking', and are quite distinct from any bodily operations of sight, hearing, smell, which humans might share with animals. Animals themselves have only the lower or bodily grade of sensation and 'lead their lives merely by physical movements', those 'movements of their fear, hope, joy, that they can have without any thought' (Descartes quoted in Rodis-Lewis 1978:168-9).

The effect is to enforce a strict and total division not only between mental and bodily activity, but between mind and nature and between human and animal. As mind becomes pure thought—pure *res cogitans* or thinking substance, mental, incorporeal, without location, bodiless—body as its dualised other becomes pure matter, pure *res extensa*, materiality as lack. As mind and nature become substances utterly different in kind and mutually exclusive, the dualist division of realms is accomplished and the possibility of continuity is destroyed from both ends. The intentional, psychological level of description is thus stripped from the body and strictly isolated in a separate mechanism of the mind. The body, deprived of such a level of description and hence of any capacity for agency, becomes an empty mechanism which has no agency or intentionality within itself, but is driven from outside by the mind. The body and nature become the dualised other of the mind.

Mechanism then involves a stripping process, the stripping out especially of mindlike qualities such as agency and goal-directedness. The same stripping process is applied in the case of the natural world to yield the account of nature as machine. Nature is taken to have no originaive power within itself, and to be devoid of teleology, to be 'plastic'. Cosmos and organism emerge as a meaningless assemblage of parts because their organising principles are lost in the destruction of intentional description, and its isolation in the separate organ of mind. Because agency is stripped from a mechanistically conceived nature, it has to be reinserted into the picture from outside, either by godlike humans or by God himself, who drives nature as a separate Unmoved

Mover, just as the mind drives and controls the actions of the body. The position of the exterior mover *vis-à-vis* nature corresponds to the mind's position *vis-à-vis* the body. There is an intimate linkage between the dualism of mind and nature and the dualism of mind and body.

All these features of Cartesianism make for a great and unbridgeable division between the sphere of nature and the sphere of the mental, identified on the general level with the human and on the individual level with the self. *Consciousness* now divides the universe completely in a total cleavage between the thinking being and mindless nature, and between the thinking substance and 'its' body, which becomes the division between consciousness and clockwork. Gone is the teleological and organic in biological explanation. Mind is defining of and confined to human knowers, and nature is merely alien.

Several feminist philosophers, especially Susan Bordo, have argued that many of the features of Cartesian epistemology which lead to this loss of continuity result from an account of self which is implicitly masculine. Cartesianism retains and expands in the epistemological sphere the earlier rationalist denials of dependency on the body. The Cartesian knower as 'thinking substance' is without body, unlocated, his knowledge not limited by a bodily perspective; the body is backgrounded and denied in the Cartesian account of achievement and identity. As with the early Plato, identity is divorced from the body, interpreted, as in the *Phaedo*, as a hindrance to knowledge. As Bordo shows, the ideal of knowledge as freedom from doubt and as objectivity is also interpreted as freedom from the body and its deceptions, weaknesses and hindrances, its personal and emotional ties (Bordo 1987:89; Flax 1985:27). But these features do not establish a masculine identity for the Cartesian knower so much as the identity of the master. The body is 'feminine-associated', but it is even more clearly associated with other oppressed groups, such as 'primitives', animals, slaves and those who labour with their bodies.

In Cartesianism, as in earlier rationalism, the excluded and inferiorised contrast of 'pure' thought includes much more than the feminine. Its contrasts now include not only animality and the body itself, but also material reality, practical activity, change, the emotions, sympathy and subjectivity. These features are drawn together in the new concept of objectivity: interpreted oppositionally as pure thought, objectivity involves setting aside 'all distractions and passions which obscure thinking' (Bordo 1987:27). For Evelyn Fox Keller, the insistence on an impartiality which rules out any blurring of boundaries between subject and object, and the relationship of sympathy and continuity with what is known, is the feature which most clearly marks out such an epistemology of objectivity as masculine. I would argue that we need to modify this thesis in two major ways: first, it is not only the feminine

that is excluded, and second, overcoming Cartesian separation does not require the loss of boundaries or of separate identity between knower and known, because the Cartesian knowledge relationship is the epistemological correlate of dualism. It involves not just separation but hyperseparation, construing sharing and connection as a hindrance to knowledge, the object known as alien to the knower, and the knowledge relation as power (Fox Keller 1985).

A hyperseparated account of self also emerges in Cartesian solipsism, an extreme denial of dependency which doubts the other's mindful existence and treats the other as alien to the self, excluding the possibility of mutual recognition or exchange (Flax 1985:28–9). For Benjamin, such a hyperdifferentiation of self and other is associated with the inability to grasp the aliveness of the other; it reflects the dualisation of the self/other boundary and its construal as a relationship of opposition and power (Benjamin 1988:193). In the Cartesian dream of power, the subject is set over against the object it knows, in a relation of alleged neutrality in practice modelled as power and control. We are yet to awaken from this dream, which has formed modern conceptions of scientific knowledge and rationality, human as well as non-human identities.