

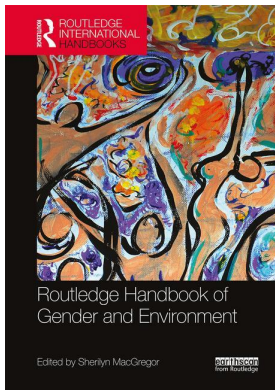
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Sherilyn MacGregor

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Freya Mathews

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THE DILEMMA OF DUALISM

Freya Mathews

Introduction

A defining tenet of feminist environmental scholarship, and ecological feminist theory in particular, is that the domination of women is ideologically linked with the domination of nature. This stems from a recognition that, in Western traditions of thought, the category of the feminine is constructed in opposition to that of masculinity, while the category of nature is constructed in opposition to that of culture; this opposition is an hierarchical one that not only dichotomizes the masculine and feminine but also ranks men above women and culture above nature. Such a dualizing schema is held by ecofeminist theorists to be deeply entrenched, structuring to some degree not only conceptions of gender and nature but also the very foundations of Western knowledge per se. It follows that, from an ecofeminist perspective, neither women nor the natural world may be emancipated unless thinking is freed from the distorting lens of dualism. If the influence of dualism as an organizing principle of thought is so profound, however, we might wonder whether it can be attributed merely to ideology, as much ecofeminist analysis implies. To answer this question of the origins of dualism correctly is surely important, since unless those origins are fully identified it will not be possible to explain how or why dualism has acquired such a hold on Western thought, nor will it be possible to escape its grip.

Most would agree that it was the environmental philosopher, Val Plumwood, who gave definitive form to the ecofeminist analysis of dualism. In this chapter I review the background to her analysis before examining that analysis itself. I shall then suggest that the roots of dualism lie not merely in historical forms of the politics of gender but, insidiously, in the very activity of theorizing itself. If this is true, then counter-dualist theories, and even emancipatory forms of politics based on them, will not help us shake off the shackles of dualism. The way to escape from a dualist mind-set will lie in forms of practice that counter the dualizing tendencies inherent in theory. To make this claim is not merely to argue that dualist habits of thought cannot be broken unless we put theory into practice. Such an argument would indeed be obvious. It is rather to argue that theorizing itself is an exercise, a form of 'practice', that fosters a dualist outlook. If we are to escape such an outlook, then theorizing must be offset by other, countering exercises or practices. As long as ecofeminism continues to define itself in theoretical terms, as philosophical discourse, the consciousness of ecofeminists will arguably remain dualist, however opposed to dualism their theoretical stance might be.

Environmental philosophy and the critique of dualism

Environmental philosophy emerged as a discipline in the 1970s. Environmental philosophers recognized that the environmental problems that were coming into view at the time were the upshot not merely of flawed policies but of an underlying attitude to the natural world that was built into the very foundations of Western thought. This was the attitude of *anthropocentrism*, the groundless presumption that only human beings matter, morally speaking; to the extent that anything else matters, it does so, from an anthropocentric perspective, only because it has some kind of utility for humanity. Environmental philosophers challenged this view, and declared the need for 'a new, an environmental, ethic', an ethic of nature (Routley 1973).

Val Plumwood (or, as she was then known, Val Routley), together with her husband Richard Routley, was one of the pioneers of this discipline. They joined a handful of colleagues around the English-speaking world in exploring why such a blinding moral prejudice in favour of humanity had developed in the West. It was clear that some kind of dichotomizing tendency was at work, setting the human, in the shape of culture, apart from and above nature. The human stood as the measure of all meaning and value against the brute facticity of nature. But how could this bias in favour of humanity have become justified? What was so special about the human? The assumption underlying this conviction appeared to be the Cartesian one that humans alone possess mental attributes, where it is only mental attributes that confer intrinsic value on things. Without mental attributes of some description, an entity cannot matter to itself or in itself, since it cannot have meaning, value, interests or ends of its own. A being that does matter to itself, that seeks its own good or is invested in its own ends, is surely entitled to moral consideration. If humans alone possess mind, then humans alone are entitled to moral consideration.

Many environmental philosophers sought to show that anthropocentrism was misguided. Clean up the Cartesian fallacies on which it rests, they argued, and the devaluation of nature will be rectified: a whole new respect for nature, figured as an environmental ethic, will come into view.¹ As the only woman among those earliest pioneers of environmental philosophy, Plumwood was perhaps a little more sceptical than her colleagues about the efficacy of argument. Surely anthropocentrism rested on more than a mere mistake, an innocent misunderstanding, that philosophers could put right with corrective arguments? In the years following her divorce from Richard Routley in the early 1980s, Val, who now took the name Plumwood, found herself looking to feminism for clues to the riddle of anthropocentrism and the mind-matter dualism that subtended it. For feminists too had been pondering dualism and the system of human/nature, culture/nature binaries that emanated from it (Ortner 1974; Merchant 1980; see also Thompson and MacGregor in this volume). In feminist theory, however, dualism was intrinsically gendered and it required analysis not merely in logical but in *political* terms. The hold of dualism on the Western imagination had proved resistant to argument and hence correction because it served a political purpose and was held in place by powerful political interests. The political purpose it served was to naturalize and legitimate male domination or, in the lexicon of 1980s feminism, patriarchy.

Feminist theorists were of course no more alone in their focus on dualism than were environmental philosophers, for the analysis of binary oppositions was core to the project of deconstruction that was unfolding in France under the leadership of Jacques Derrida (1970). Many feminists eventually situated their own approach to dualism within a deconstructive framework. The legacy of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, with its emphasis on the role of instrumental reason in constructing a notion of nature as the ultimate object of domination, was also strong at the time. For critical theorists, the domination of nature served as the ideological template for political domination generally (Leiss 1972). In many ways, the quest to dismantle dualism was a

defining preoccupation of the twentieth century, as the influence of dualism spread across many of the disciplinary streams of the Western academy. However, it was to the history of feminist thought in particular that Plumwood turned in seeking to clarify the political roots of dualism as they pertained to the fate of the environment.

The feminist critique of dualism

Recognition of dualism, and in particular the association of women with nature, was not new in feminist thought. Indeed, feminists had remarked on it right from the start. In a sense the whole history of feminist thought in the West has been a struggle with dualism. As far back as 1789, Mary Wollstonecraft noticed the association of women with nature in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Women, she observed, were regarded as creaturely beings, closer than men to the estate of animals, deficient in those higher – rational – faculties of mind definitive of the human. They were accordingly considered uneducable. But, Wollstonecraft insisted, women were kept in such a condition of creatureliness because this was in accordance with the sexual tastes of men. Given a chance at education, women would soon prove themselves to be the equals of men (Wollstonecraft 1985).

For almost two hundred years thereafter, feminists tirelessly protested at the metaphoric assimilation of women to nature. Writing within the liberal framework that had set the terms for progressive politics in the seventeenth century ‘Age of Reason’, they by and large followed Wollstonecraft in upholding the liberal view of human nature as consisting in the capacity for reason (Jaggar 1984). Any innate deficiency in reason was seen as representing a failure to rise above the estate of nature and become fully human. In other words, liberal feminists tacitly accepted the reason/nature, human/nature dualisms that underpinned liberalism; they merely tried to de-gender these categories, striving to pry apart the notions of woman and nature and attribute the capacity for reason to women as well as men (Friedan 1963; Beauvoir 1965).

While there is no denying that a significant proportion of Western women today owe a huge debt to liberal feminists, who did indeed win the right to equality of opportunity in education, thereby eventually opening up the public sphere and all its powers to (some) women, with historical hindsight we can nevertheless question liberal feminists’ acceptance of the dualistic underpinnings of liberalism (Jaggar 1984). Their attempts to demonstrate that women were ‘just as good’ as men, meaning just as endowed with the capacity for reason, and hence just as removed from nature and mere creatureliness, implicitly condoned the anthropocentrism that demoted nature and everything associated with it to inferior status.

When so-called second wave feminism exploded onto the scene in the 1970s, however, the venerable liberal tradition of feminism was hotly challenged. Did women really want to become like men, or at least as men supposed themselves to be – sober, detached, measured, objective, impartial, the proverbial ‘men of reason’, the ‘masters and possessors of nature’, as Descartes put it? No! The new radical, and then ‘gynocentric’ – or, as they came to be known, ‘cultural’ – feminists wanted no part of patriarchal identity. The association of woman with embodiment (with fertility, procreation, eros, nurturance, and corporeality) and hence with nature (the terrain of life, purpose, creativity, vulnerability, of intelligence and sentience in a thousand guises, the exuberant and fecund matrix of our existence) was to be ardently embraced. Gynocentric (or woman-centred) feminists repudiated reason as the yardstick of humanness and replaced it with ostensibly feminine attributes, such as the capacities to nurture, feel and care (Rich 1977; Daly 1978; Griffin 1978; Irigaray 1985). Women whose commitment was as much to environmental as to feminist political causes rejoiced in the new valorization of nature and the privileged position to which cultural feminism assigned them as women in relation to it. They recognized that the

struggle for nature was inextricable from the feminist struggle, and they adopted the banner of *ecofeminism* to signal this inextricability (King 1983; d'Eaubonne 1994).

Exhilarating and necessary as gynocentric feminism was as an historical moment of female empowerment and recovery; however, it was of course only a halfway house to true liberation, whether for women or nature. Gynocentric feminists had no more dismantled the underlying ideology of subordination – dualism – than liberal feminists had. They had reversed the values attaching to the terms of the dualistic schema but had not sufficiently scrutinized the exclusionary and hierarchical structure of the schema itself (Lloyd 1984; Plumwood 1993). In place of androcentrism and patriarchy, gynocentrists had enshrined gynarchy. The traditional masculine and feminine, and all the exclusive oppositions in terms of which these categories were defined, still remained intact, a schema for domination – whether of women by men or men by women ultimately was not the point.

As the 1980s wore on, feminists of all stripes, including ecofeminists, continued to wrestle with the problem of dualism. It was clear that Western thought had always been organized around a core of dichotomous, hierarchically-ordered categories, such as the following:

mind/matter
mind/body
culture/nature
human/nature
human/animal

These binaries provided the basis for further key oppositions, such as

reason/emotion
reason/intuition
abstract/concrete
universal/particular
subject/object

In new theoretical domains this dualistic core continually threw up new binaries, such as public/private in the context of liberalism and production/reproduction in the context of Marxism (Ruether 1978; Jaggar 1984; Lloyd 1984). It was also clear that, from the start, dualism as a principle of organization had been inherently gendered: the terms on the higher, left-hand side of the binaries were systematically associated with, and served to define, masculinity, while those on the lower, right-hand side were associated with, and served to define, the feminine.

The whole historical apparatus of dualism had evolved, it seemed, to naturalize and legitimate a particular, specifically patriarchal, system of domination by making the dominance of the masculine appear as a natural characteristic of the universe at large. Everything identified as masculine in the system represented a transcendence of everything identified as feminine, where everything identified as feminine was invariably merely given by nature. Thus men inhabited a *public* sphere of *abstract* and *universal*, *spiritual* and *mental* concerns, whereas women remained immersed in the *concrete* and *particular* realm of the *private*, a *domestic* sphere, bound to the *body* by the requirements of *reproduction*. Woman was, in a word, *nature* to man's *culture*. In transcending nature, man transcended – that is to say, raised himself above – woman, and thereby justified his domination of her.

While feminist theorists agreed on the centrality of dualism to patriarchal ideology, they disagreed on what to salvage of the traditional (dualistically defined) feminine and what to discard.

Deep partings of the way occurred. Some feminists – including some ecofeminists, such as Mary Daly and Susan Griffin – clung uncritically to the gynocentric valorization of woman and nature and continued to insist that the link between them was real, deriving from women’s reproductive biology, rather than conceding that the link was an artefact of patriarchal ideology (Plumwood 1993). Other feminists, often described as standpoint feminists, steered away from such biological essentialism, but continued to see an affinity between women and nature on historical materialist grounds: the reproductive work that has traditionally been the province of women remains embedded in the material and the biological rather than the abstract and political, and therefore does indeed give rise to a consciousness and identity attuned to these levels of existence (Salleh 1984, 2005; Hartsock 1985; Harding 1986). The majority of feminists in the Anglophone world however eventually adopted a deconstructive perspective: they saw the link between woman and nature as entirely fabricated, a patriarchal conceit, and accordingly sought to abolish all the identities that supervened on it. Many of these feminists were influenced by the deconstructive movement in France, and particularly by the work of French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, which tended to place large theoretical frameworks and the categories and identities they subtended in doubt, seeing all such discourse as a political instrument for the naturalizing and legitimating of power relations. The deconstructive turn in feminism led to reluctance to define woman at all (Alcoff 1986; Butler 1990), and it vehemently rejected any actual affinity between women and nature.

Tracking this crisscrossed field of debate throughout the 1980s, Plumwood eventually shot a laser beam of analysis into the fray, crystallizing and clarifying the logical structure and ideological function of dualism as a major organizing principle of Western thought. In her 1993 book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, she skilfully wove together feminist arguments, including those of ecofeminists such as Rosemary Ruether (1978) and Karen Warren (1990), with environmental and post-colonial arguments. Her aim was to show that each term in a binary opposition is not merely dichotomized or *hyper-separated* from its opposite and *ranked* relative to it, but that the term on the right hand side of each pair is *instrumentalized* to, or made to appear as if created for the purpose of serving, the term on the left. So, for example, the body is seen merely as a vessel for the mind, rather than having significance in its own right; the purpose of the private is seen as assuring the material conditions for the all-important affairs of the public. The ‘inferior’ term in each binary is also *backgrounded* with respect to the ‘superior’. Thus, for example, the private sphere figures only as background to the sphere of history and culture, while the dependency of the latter on the private is glossed over, unacknowledged. The lesser term may also be *incorporated* into the greater term, attaining definition only in terms of its lacks or deficiencies relative to the greater. Animals, for example, tend to be measured in terms of their deficiencies relative to humans rather than in terms of their own specific excellences. Lesser terms are also *homogenized* relative to their counterparts, in the sense that they are viewed en masse, as a block, rather than in their richly differentiated specificity. So, again, all sentient life on the planet is lumped together under the category ‘animal’ in contradistinction to the category ‘human’, despite the fact that the human is in reality only one animal species among a staggeringly vast and various array of others.

Through this systematic analysis it finally became clear how dualism, or the system of binary oppositions, legitimizes not merely male domination, but domination generally. Dualism as a schema of organization is constantly re-applied in new discursive domains to create categories that serve to naturalize and legitimate domination: civilized/primitive, colonizer/colonized, science/superstition, mental/manual, public/private, production/reproduction, self/other. In Plumwood’s (1993) analysis, such categories function within and across discourses to construct a ‘master identity’, which is gendered but not exclusively *male*. Moreover, this master identity hinges on a particular dualistic pair that Plumwood identified as core to the system, viz the

reason/nature pair: reason is defined in opposition to everything associated with feeling and the body and ultimately, and most especially, nature. Reason is, in this system, infiltrated with the meanings of all the terms on the left-hand side of the table of opposites and is, most importantly, that which distinguishes humans from, and raises us above, nature. To the extent that a particular social group can lay a greater claim to reason than another group, it will construct the second group dualistically as in every way exhibiting the opposite of reason: difference, in other words, will be re-worked as dichotomy, and the second group will end up playing nature to the first group's master identity.

Of course, historically the pre-eminent group that laid claim to reason was the class of educated white males; they constituted the reference group for the master identity. But the master identity is sensitive to context. In a colonial context, educated white women might assume the master identity relative to indigenous or colonized peoples, who will then be dichotomously constructed in terms of the attributes on the right hand side of the table of opposites, while the white women will assume, in a kind of honorary capacity and only relative to the indigenous or colonized, all the attributes on the left hand side. In other words, the white women in the colonial context might assume a masculine-tinged identity in relation to the native people, who will be glossed as feminine. It is the native people who will be perceived as irrational, primitive, superstitious, animal, and close to nature compared with the 'civilized' and (in that sense more rational) white women, even though those same women will be constructed as emotional, intuitive, and unstable, subject to hormonal influences and so on, in relation to their male counterparts. In this way Plumwood showed that the master identity is much more than a male identity, even though there is a pre-established fit between this and a certain class of men. The master identity is a dominator identity that can and does constellate itself anew in any context, and in Plumwood's analysis, it revolves around a particular conception of reason on the one hand and nature on the other. Wherever reason in this sense is privileged over other ways of thinking, knowing, and experiencing, there we can expect to find nature construed as a nullity. We can also, in consequence, expect to find complex, mutually reinforcing, and ramifying processes of mastery or domination in train.

The thesis of Plumwood's (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, in sum, is that dualism is not merely a vehicle of male domination, but is the complex and adaptable underlay of domination generally in the West, reiterating itself historically in each major new discourse for the purpose of rationalizing regimes not only of gender, but also of race, class, and species. In light of this finding, neither feminists nor environmentalists – nor, for that matter, post-colonialists, socialists, or the theorists of any other emancipatory discourse – could afford to overlook the workings of dualism. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* thus helped clean up and give definitive form to the feminist analysis of dualism, in the process vindicating – and greatly expanding – the ecofeminist proposition that the struggle for the environment was inextricable from the struggle for women, indeed from the struggle for subordinated groups generally. It also exposed the political roots of anthropocentrism, thereby rescuing environmental philosophy from the ineffectuality to which it was doomed as a purely rationalist exercise preoccupied with finding environmentally friendly criteria for moral considerability. Plumwood's analysis showed that anthropocentrism was held in place not merely by defective reasoning but by a potent psychosexual agenda of domination.

Dismantling dualism

If dualism was the problem, then the solution would presumably lie in the dismantling of dualism. But in what would such a dismantling consist? Would it be a matter simply of putting back together what dualism had sundered, restoring mind to matter, resituating the human in nature,

and integrating reason with other faculties of cognition and consciousness, such as intuition and emotion – redefining binary categories in ways that integrated them?

Postmodern/poststructuralist – what I call *deconstructive* – feminist theorists were not at all disposed to put back together again what dualism had split apart. For them, definition itself was the problem, at least where large abstract categories were concerned. To seek new definitions of reason, mind, human, nature, and so on would just be to create new essentialisms, enact new exclusions, and reinscribe relations of power in new ways. Deconstructionists, wary of discourse, were in no way interested in putting together a new, post-dualist paradigm. The politics of emancipation consisted, for them, of keeping up resistance to the narratives inevitably and ongoingly created by relations of power. In other words, their political stance was one of refusal, resistance, demolition; it was a stance that sought to expose the way in which power was turned into prescribed systems of thought and into protocols of performance in human societies (Alcoff 1986; Butler 1990).

But in the minority (and increasingly marginalized) streams of ecofeminism, and in environmental philosophy, intimations of how to put back together what dualism had sundered abounded, and these intimations generally pointed to relationality as the theoretical antidote to dualism. If dualism was a paradigm that defined entities and attributes by hyper-separation, then relationality was the key to a new, emerging paradigm that would define entities and attributes in terms of their constitutive relations with one another, retaining difference and distinctness but construing these not in terms of exclusion, hierarchy, instrumentalism, backgrounding, incorporation, or homogenization, but rather in terms of continuity.

The notion of ecology was, as environmental philosophers were in the process of demonstrating, key to the articulation of relationality (Naess 1985, 1988; Fox 1990; Mathews 1991). Ecophilosophers recognized that mind-matter dualism is correlated with an atomistic assumption about the nature of identity: objects or entities are posited, from this perspective, as ‘distinct existences’, each one logically independent of all others. Logically speaking, any given individual could conceivably exist independently of all others. Its identity is not a function of the identities of other entities. There is no risk here that if certain entities, such as humans, are attributed with a special attribute, such as mind, this attribute would ‘leak out’, so to speak, into surrounding entities. Only by way of such an atomistic criterion of individuation could the dualization of mind and matter be accomplished (Mathews 1991).

To overcome mind/matter dualism, then, it was necessary to propose an alternative principle of individuation, one that defined entities in terms of their inter-relations with other entities. An ecological perspective provided a ready-made template for such an alternative. From the viewpoint of ecology – or to be precise, ecology under a philosophical interpretation – entities are defined in terms of their various constitutive relations with other elements of an ecosystem. Consider, for example, the case of Blue Whale and krill. How, from an atomistic perspective, would a Blue Whale be individuated and identified? Presumably via its physical configuration in space and time. Logically (as opposed to causally or materially) speaking, a Blue Whale could exist all by itself in the universe. A universe consisting of just a Blue Whale floating in otherwise empty space would be at least conceivable, in the sense that the entity in question would still count as a Blue Whale, provided it possessed the spatiotemporal configuration, the anatomy, of a Blue Whale. From an ecological perspective, however, a Blue Whale would not be logically isolable in this way. To define a Blue Whale, to say what it is, one has to detail its anatomy, yes, but one also has to mention krill: how the anatomy of the Blue Whale – its huge balleen mouth, for instance, that filters seawater – is only an outward reflection of its constitutive relationship with tiny krill. A Blue Whale is, from this ecological point of view, a creature whose entire being is a reference to krill: Blue Whale and krill are *internally* or *logically* related. They are related not just causally or materially but at the level of identity. This is not to say that they are the same thing,

or that the identity of the Blue Whale incorporates or subsumes that of krill, but only that they are behaviourally as well as anatomically mutually configuring.

By the same token, while the Blue Whale might impress us with its prodigious intelligence, this intelligence does not belong exclusively to it but emanates from the ecosystem to which it belongs. Intelligence is here an implicate attribute of the ecosystem, explicated in the Blue Whale but distributed through the system and shared at an implicate level by the humble krill. In a relational schema, in which identity and individuation are logically constituted through the interactivity of entities, mind and matter, intelligence and nature, cannot be dualistically divided and divorced one from the other. Mind/matter dualism is impossible (Mathews 1991).

Human identity, according to ecophilosophers, is no different from Blue Whale identity. It is constituted, through and through, by its relations with other species and communities of life. The human being is no longer a 'higher', mentally endowed self, set apart from and looking down on a 'lower', blind nature, but an *ecological self*, its identity a mesh of relations with other species, its intelligence a function of the intelligence of ecosystems, of the biosphere (Naess 1985, 1988; Fox 1990; Mathews 1991). Both within and beyond environmental philosophy, the relational perspective has spawned a whole new generation of metaphysical theories to replace the materialist metaphysic that, despite dating back to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, remains the foundation-stone for modern civilization. These metaphysical theories, sometimes intersecting with contemporary philosophies of consciousness, range from panpsychism (Mathews 2003; Skrbina 2009; Blamauer 2011) and philosophical animism (Harvey 2005; Plumwood 2009) to the so-called new materialisms of the post-deconstructive school (Bennett 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012).

Meanwhile, however, as ecophilosophers were exploring relational selfhood in an ecological context in the 1980s and early 1990s, feminists were conducting similar explorations in social and epistemological contexts. In psychology or psychoanalysis, the relational self seeks to build its identity on continuity and affiliation with others rather than on separation from them, as had been assumed in traditional psychoanalytic theory (Chodorow 1979; Benjamin 1988). In science, the 'knower' seeks to understand the 'known' through engagement, empathy, and communication, rather than by assuming the detached, distanced, disinterested, affectless – and often lethal and 'dissecting' – stance of the classical scientist (Keller 1985). The social self, defined by its relations with other humans, sees in communalism rather than in individualism the fundamental estate of the human, thereby confuting the social atomism that had been a premise of the liberal tradition (Jaggar 1984; Miller 1986). For the relational self, respect for others is a corollary of recognition of one's own inextricable entanglement with them. An attitude of care arises spontaneously as a result of the relational approach without need for recourse to formal codes of conduct (Gilligan 1982). In all these contexts, relationality dissolves dualism and reinstates an ethical relationship between self and its world.

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* and her 2003 book, *Environmental Culture*, Plumwood followed this relational path, drawing particularly on feminist standpoint theory to theorize relational alternatives to dualism in politics, epistemology, psychology, and ethics. Such relational thinking was, according to Plumwood, the province of ecological rationality, as distinct from the old divisive, instrumental rationality of dualism.

But why reason?

Re-reading *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, one is struck by the fact that Plumwood never really defines reason. What is reason, exactly? Isn't it a certain set of logical and procedural tools for reflexive thinking? But in the dualist schema it functions more as a signifier of identity.

The form of identity it signifies is one constituted through division, separation, distancing, and domination. But what has thinking logically and reflexively to do with this? Yes, one can think logically and reflexively in the service of a master identity, but one can also think logically and reflexively, as Plumwood herself insists, in the service of relational identities. Why then should it have been reason that was singled out in the dualist schema as the definitive attribute of a dominator identity? True, reason is a marker of mind and hence of value. But why should not some other highly developed mode of cognition have been selected as the marker of mind?

Insofar as there is an answer to these questions in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, it seems to be that the association of reason with a dominator identity is strictly ideological. In the fourth chapter of the book, Plumwood traces the origins of dualism as an ideological construct back to Plato. It was in Plato that the core dichotomy, reason versus nature, took shape for the purpose of opposing everything associated with menials – such as women, slaves, and animals – to the distinctive attributes of the leisured male class whose privileges depended on the services of these menials. The distinctive activity of the leisured class, to which Plato himself of course belonged, was reasoning, as exemplified in philosophical and mathematical thinking. The capacity for reasoning was accordingly selected as the attribute that set the members of this class apart from, and justified their control over, the messy, sweaty realm of reproductive and domestic labour and sheer physical affordance that was the province of the menial classes.

Indeed, the political intent that shaped the reason/nature dualism of Plato's thought, according to Plumwood's analysis, was not merely a matter of the self-legitimation of the elite. At a deeper level it pertained to warfare. Since slaves formed the principal productive base for the intellectual class to which Plato belonged, and since slaves could only be procured through warfare, warfare was the condition for the perpetuation of the Athenian system of privilege. Militarism was accordingly promoted as the pillar of the state in Plato's political philosophy, as evidenced in the *Republic*. But how could one ensure a caste of warriors ready routinely to risk their lives in warfare? It was ultimately in response to this problem, according to Plumwood, that Plato posited a realm of transcendence, the realm of the insensible Forms, imperishable, unchanging, eternal, perfect, and ideal, to which human beings, and only human beings, could gain access, via reason. Death would hold no terrors for the philosopher-warrior who had mentally left behind the world of sensible, mutable particulars – the messy entanglements of labourers, women, and animals – and entered instead a rarefied realm of abstract thought, articulated most fittingly and paradigmatically in mathematics. Plato's thought, then, with its positing of a higher, eternal realm accessible to reason and a lower, perishable realm of nature, served the political purpose of justifying the privilege of his own class and securing the conditions for its perpetuation.²

If Plumwood's account of the origins of reason/nature dualism is correct, then we may well wonder why such thinking has retained its appeal. Why has reason endured as the core dualist category through so many centuries of changing social relationships and conditions? Western societies have not continued to depend on slavery and hence on warfare for the procurement of slaves throughout their history, so why should they continue to define ruling male classes in terms of reason? Even if reason as an antidote to death had remained politically relevant, Christianity was soon to offer, only a few centuries after Plato, an entirely different avenue to immortality. According to Christian teaching, the marker of the human, and indeed of immortality, was soul, not reason. So why should reason retain its centrality in dualistic schemas?

I would suggest that reason is indeed integral to dualism, as Plumwood claims, but that the actual roots of dualism lie much deeper in the structure of thought than ad hoc, strictly ideological (or even diffusely psychological) explanations such as Plumwood's allow. Dualism is, I shall argue, a phenomenological corollary of a certain way of thinking that was an innate potential of human cognition. As such it would have been discovered sooner or later in human history

regardless of political contingencies. This particular way of thinking did indeed involve reasoning, but it cannot be adequately described merely in terms of logic. Its dualistic character is rather something that is *enacted* in consciousness via a particular cognitive operation, specifically the very act itself of theorizing.

Theoria and strategia

It was a brilliant and arresting article by the French philosopher and sinologist Francois Jullien that first set me thinking along these lines. As an environmental philosopher, I had been part of the project of developing a theoretical alternative to the dualist, atomist, and mechanistic paradigm, the alternative favoured by me being a relational and panpsychist one, drawing on the ancient philosophical idea that consciousness – mind or soul (psyche) – is a universal feature of all things. As philosophers, we saw ourselves engaged in a contest of truths – a contest in which we sought to replace the ostensible truths of a worldview based on dualism with the genuine truths of a worldview based on relationality. But Jullien's article, 'Did philosophers have to become fixated on truth?' (2002), signalled the possible contingency of truth as the goal of cognition. And it was the meta-level contrast Jullien drew between the figure of the ancient Greek philosopher and that of the Chinese sage that made plain this contingency of truth as a goal. He observes that while the philosopher set out to explain the world, to provide an accurate and exhaustive representation of it, the sage set out to adapt or accommodate himself to it (both figures are always male in these traditions). The sage sought to identify the tendencies or dispositions at work in particular situations in order to harness those tendencies or dispositions to his own best advantage. To this end he remained open to all points of view instead of insisting, as philosophers did, on a single representation ('the truth') exclusive of others. In describing the sage as seeking 'congruence' with reality, Jullien seems to imply that the thinking of the sage remained inextricable from agency rather than becoming, like the thinking of the Greeks, an end in itself. I would suggest that the contrast drawn by Jullien between the Greek philosopher and the Chinese sage can be further developed to the point where it can shed a deeper light on the origins of dualism.

Let us consider the actual process whereby a philosopher – ancient or modern – seeks truth. Take the case of a thinker who, like the pre-Socratics, is inquiring after the basic constitution of reality. His method is to engage in a particular mental or cognitive operation: he holds an inner mirror up to the manifest world of the senses. In that mirror he constructs an abstract duplicate or conceptual map of the world. Reason, in the sense of the articulation and observance of laws of definition, inference and coherence, is integral to this process, but the actual purpose of the process is not to reason but to mirror (Mathews 2016). As soon as the thinker finds in that abstract duplicate a schema he regards as accurately reflecting the nature of things, he has, he considers, discovered truth. The truth about reality, or some aspect or portion of reality, is ideal and permanent. It is in fact eternal: the world changes, but the truth about the world does not change. Things arise and pass away, moment by moment, but the truth about them is timeless. The goal of thought is, from the perspective of the philosopher, to grasp truth, and the grasping of truth is an end in itself.

Such a notion of truth had not crystallized in other ancient societies in quite the same way as it did among the Greeks, and for this reason philosophy is regarded as a Greek invention. In other ancient societies thinking was still inextricable from agency – humans thought in order to act in some way. Apprehending the world via mythic narratives was inseparable from invoking its divinity or tapping into its agency. In thinking and knowing in these old ways one remained, first and foremost, an agent within the world negotiating one's way around it, rather than a spectator, a looker in an inner mirror that reflected reality. For the Greeks, however, approaching the

world through this mental operation of doubling, of re-presenting in abstract what was initially presented to the mind through the senses, reality appeared under a peculiar disembodied, ideal, untouchable aspect, reflective of what-is but inert, unable to act upon the observer or be acted upon by them. While this inertness of the ideal duplicate that was the object of knowledge was not historically accomplished all at once, and traces of the older mythic narratives lingered in the philosophizing of the pre-Socratics, it did become dramatically explicit in Plato, in the shape of the Theory of Forms. The Forms were the abstract, eternal, perfect, and unchanging images to which any actual, concrete, perishable world must conform. The goal of thought was to access this abstract realm and apprehend reality under a timeless rather than an ever-changing aspect. But in positing the Forms, Plato was really no more than describing, in reified terms, the phenomenology of the act of theorizing itself. In projecting a mental reflection or re-presentation or idealized schema of the world onto a kind of abstract screen in an inner theatre, the mind is constituting theory. This mental process has left its trace in etymology: the word ‘theory’ is derived from the Greek, *theoria*, a looking at, thing looked at; *theoros*, spectator; and *thea*, spectacle.

In the process of theorizing, the human mind subtly removed itself from reality and became reality’s spectator, an observer of the drama, invisible from within the constructed drama itself and in this sense invested with a status different from the elements of that drama, the elements of the re-presented reality. The drama itself, the spectacle, was constructed via extrapolation from and idealization of experience. The mind constructed a map or model that was intended to reflect, in outline, the immediate world of experience but also to complete it. Though total, this map or model – *theoria* – was nevertheless a totality that, as something created by the knower, could not include the knower among its contents.

The knower who could not be included in his/her own ideal re-presentation of reality was, I would suggest, the original subject, and the world as ideal projection, or re-presentation in the theatre of the subject’s mind, the original object. It was, in other words, via the subtle reification involved in *theoria*, the introjective act of reflective knowing, that the world first became an object for the human mind, inert and untouchable and completely devoid of real presence or agency of its own. And it is in this separation of active, world-constructing subject from the merely acted-upon, constructed object, in which I would further suggest we find the origin of dualism: dualism is a function of the subject-object bifurcation that inevitably occurs as a result of the mental operation involved in that form of knowing here described as theory or *theoria*. Qua active knower, the subject is categorically different from the mere after-image of the world that it projects onto its mental screen, and as a result it inevitably feels the sense of apartness from, and aloofness to, the world that we witness in the history of dualism. Indeed there is a built-in autism, or radical self-centrism, in the standpoint of the subject, in the sense that the subject is developmentally disposed to fail to recognize, in any deeply felt way, the subjectivity of re-presented others. To the extent that self-other relations are mediated by theory then, they will be ethically problematic. The experience of theorizing will effectively block any attempt to allow subjectivity to the world at large.

Much further down the historical track, when the initial Greek objectification of reality for purely explanatory purposes had led to a more accurate, detailed, and comprehensive form of theorization – the body of knowledge known to us as science – humanity would be enabled to exercise its agency, which had initially been bracketed in the search for truth, on an unprecedented scale. But this was a new form of agency, the agency of a subject no longer negotiating the world from within but comprehensively objectifying it in the ‘mirror’ of *theoria*, and then reflexively premeditating and rehearsing action before carrying it out in actuality. This calculated form of agency, in which the very means for action were themselves theoretically mediated and actualized as technology, turned out to entrain undreamed of efficacy. Such efficacy,

combined with the autistic tendency within the dualistic orientation, has in time enabled the wholesale transformation – and degradation – of earth in the service of human ends.

If this argument that the origins of dualism lie in the very activity of theorizing is accepted, then it follows, of course, that we cannot escape dualism by further theorizing. This is not to say that it is impossible to theorize the world in non-dualist and relational ways. It is eminently possible to do so, as the theories of numerous feminists and environmental philosophers and, more recently, new materialists attest. But such theories will lack philosophical traction, because the very experience of thinking them re-enacts at a subconscious level the original subject-object bifurcation. How then can the grip of dualism be broken? Let us return to Jullien's Chinese sage. Where the philosopher became mesmerized by representation and the products of his own thought, and retreated to a 'life of the mind', the sage remained immersed in and engaged with concrete reality. The wisdom of the sage consisted not in theory but in a capacity to live effectively. His definitive discovery was that one lives most effectively by adapting or accommodating oneself to reality. He sought to identify the tendencies or dispositions at work in particular situations not in order to capture them in theory but in order to harness them to his own best advantage. This stance of accommodation, of working with the grain of reality rather than cutting against it in an attempt to impose one's will upon it by sheer force, is enshrined in Chinese tradition as *wu wei*, the stance of effortless action, of swimming with the flow rather than swimming against the current (Lafargue 1992; Mathews 2009).

If we describe the approach of the Chinese sage as *strategic* and define strategists as those who are concerned with the immediate field of influences in which they are immersed and the way in which that field impacts upon their agency, then we might look to strategy for our escape from dualism. Strategists are concerned not with an idealized 'world', conceived under its universal aspect, but with their own immediate situation and how the influences at play in it are impinging on their agency, corporeally and tangibly, in the present moment. One does not need a theory about the nature of reality in order to respond strategically to this field: one can feel the environmental pressure increasing and decreasing as one responds now this way and now that. There is no sense of this world as a completed totality; it extends just as far as the range of one's own sensitivity, and as one moves around in it this range is constantly changing. To train the strategic faculty, one does not teach reason, which is to say, the mental procedures that produce abstract schemas (where these implicate but are not reducible to the rules of logic), but rather sets exercises or practices which increase sensitivity and responsiveness. This is why Chinese sages typically received their training in martial and other Daoist arts rather than in discursive inquiry. Where philosophers theorized, sages *cultivated*.

Etymology is helpful here, as it was in the case of the term 'theory': 'strategy' is derived from the Greek *strategia*, 'office or command or art of a general'; from *stratos*, 'multitude, army, expedition'; and *agein*, 'to lead, guide, drive, carry off'; and from Sanskrit *ajirah*, 'moving, active'. In light of this, strategy may be understood as concerned with the coordination of collective or individual agency. Cognition is required for such coordination, but this is not the kind of cognition involved in *theoria*, which abstracts from the empirical agency of the subject in order to attain a more 'objective' rendering of the world. In *strategia*, cognition remains non-dualist, immersed in the world rather than set apart; it is honed in the service of agency.

Reviewing the ecofeminist critique of dualism

If dualism is indeed inherent in the act of theorizing, then it would account, I think, for the extraordinary longevity and consistency of dualism as a fundamental schema for the organization of thought. Western civilization, with its origins in ancient philosophy, is uniquely

rooted in *theoria*. Science made its first appearance in the West because science is an emanation – indeed the apotheosis – of *theoria*. The immense power over nature that science conferred enabled the West to colonize other societies and subjugate other civilizations (Merchant 1980). *Theoria*, in the shape of science, has been the key, par excellence, to the ascendancy of the West in the modern period. Since *theoria* has in this sense remained the core driver of Western civilization, the West has remained a civilization uniquely fashioned by dualistic logic.

To understand the origins of dualism in this way is to see that the dualistic outlook is not merely an ideological contrivance but the outcome of a particular evolutionary trajectory. In a male-dominated society, such as ancient Greece was, it was inevitable that the primal subject/object bifurcation enacted in the consciousness of the early philosophers should eventually give rise to gendered categories and serve as a vehicle for the legitimation of domination. But if this ideological sequel to the act of theorizing is conflated with the actual source or origin of dualism, we shall fail in our efforts to escape dualism. The primary relationship of domination entrained by the act of theorizing is that of subject versus object: the subject is inherently set apart from and above everything that can become an object of theorization. Since the theorizing subject is inevitably human, the conceptual binary at the core of dualism is that of human versus nature. Only contingently, historically, does this schema furthermore become associated with gender, race, class, and so on.

Male domination by no means inherently requires dualism for its legitimation. It can exist in the absence of a dualistic mind-set, as it did and does, for example, in China. Although Chinese civilization has from the start maintained a deep reverence for nature, as one would expect from its predominantly strategic outlook, it has also been insistently patriarchal. Male domination has been legitimated not in dualistic terms, by denying the subjectivity of women or constructing them as sub-human, but in terms of a core relationship of ruler/ruled that is regarded as structuring the entire yin-yang system of heaven and earth. In this ideological scenario, the ruled are seen as naturally subordinate but not inferior to the ruler. The relationship of ruler to ruled is in this sense genuinely complementary: it is for the sake of harmony at the level of the system as a whole that the ruled must submit to the ruler.³ That such ideological legitimation of male domination can co-exist with a respectful attitude to ward nature, correlative with China's strategic orientation, is evident from the fact that this ideology takes its cue from nature itself: although all beings are deemed equally important inasmuch as they each have their own intelligent part to play in the order of nature, this order is maintained by way of natural hierarchies – of predator to prey, for example. That nature is in this fashion normative in Chinese culture is indicative of the reverence in which it was traditionally held.⁴

The case of China signals that while adopting a strategic orientation will help to induce a basically respectful attitude to ward nature, it will not of itself preclude stronger parties in society from exercising power over weaker or more vulnerable parties. Dominant groups are inventive in devising ideologies of legitimation. Nonetheless, developing a strategic as opposed to a theoretic orientation will resolve the subject/object split that has powerfully buttressed and legitimated domination in the West. Moreover, by re-attuning us to the manifold forms of intelligence and responsiveness at play in the larger community of life and thereby re-instating our felt sense of the moral significance of the natural world, strategic modalities will help to instil new habits of consciousness, on which new patterns of affiliation and mutuality may be built.

The theory-averseness of the strategic approach seems to chime with, and perhaps add further weight to, the deconstructive approach to feminist theory, touched on earlier, which seeks to dismantle grand narratives without constructing new ones, no matter how ecological

or relational such prospective new narratives might be. But the difference from deconstruction is that, rather than remaining in a stance of refusal and resistance, strategists seek alternative, agentic modalities that re-immerses us in reality rather than leaving us stranded as spectators at an epistemic remove from it.

Strategic modalities

In ancient China, as we have already observed, the sage honed his capacity for acuity, accommodation, and adaptiveness through Daoist exercises, such as martial arts and calligraphy. But such exercises really only represent the refinement of a way of being – an engaged form of agency – that was normal and widespread in early societies, particularly in hunter-gatherer societies. In order to hunt and gather one must apprehend one's own immediate environment not theoretically but concretely, in all its particularity: One must know the plants and animals of the locality, their habits, preferences, idiosyncrasies, their relationships with one another, their particular histories. One must know the landscape intimately and intricately, its terrain, its affordances, its patterns of seasonality. This is not a detached form of knowing but a form of attentiveness to the particular that is guided, like one's responses in a martial context, by one's own vital interests. It is need and danger that open one's eyes to the significance of the particular, and train one's gaze to follow it all the way back to its lair. This is no subject/object standoff, but a push-and-pull contest of flesh with flesh. In coming to such an intimate engagement with the particular, however, one is drawn into affinity of purpose with it, into a kind of ecological collegiality which engenders fellow feeling and respect and hence a natural reticence to overstep the proper sphere of one's own agency. Intimacy, in other words – even the intimacy of the chase – begets an inclination to accommodate and adapt – the disposition toward *wu wei*.⁵

However, the reader may be wondering: How is *strategia* to be cultivated in the context of modern, industrialized, mass societies? Are there practices by which we can today burst the bubble of subject/object dualism and re-immerses ourselves in the living, unpredictable depths of reality? In the 1980s and 1990s, standpoint feminism attempted to demonstrate how the traditional domestic practices of women – childcare, care of the infirm, housework – fostered in women an engagement with the concrete and particular that was in striking contrast to the detached outlook of men preoccupied with the abstract generalities of the public sphere. In light of this legacy of traditional domestic experience, some women in modern societies may be well placed to appreciate the immersive modality of *strategia* and the disposition to accommodate and adapt that accompanies it. This is not to say that women's traditional practices were in themselves sufficient to engender a strategic outlook. The sympathies they produced, however, together with sympathy for indigenous lifeways based on intimate engagement with the particularities of one's environment, may provide a basis for creating new, normative practices that cultivate and hone the strategic faculty. Perhaps then it is a contemporary task for ecofeminist scholars to identify or devise practices whereby *strategia* can be actively cultivated, at both personal and social levels, in order to become reinstated in modern societies as our larger orientation. This is by no means to insist that in a strategic scenario the theoretical approach of science with its managerial corollary be altogether abandoned. Rather, science could be re-situated as one tool among others within the open horizon of a push-and-pull engagement with an always unobjectifiable, and in that sense spontaneous and inexhaustible, reality.

In modern societies reconfigured along the *wu wei* lines of a strategic orientation, social systems would be reconfigured *with* the grain of in situ influences rather than in accordance with the preconceived theoretical impositions of exclusively managerial approaches based on

science. Food production, for example, could respond to and nourish local ecologies rather than rendering land a *tabula rasa* for industrial monoculture (Benyus 2002). Manufacture could follow the circular, no-waste model that returns all resource materials back into the twin loops of production and ecology (McDonough 2002). Architecture and engineering could follow the contours of local topography and make full use of local affordances with respect to materials, energy, ventilation, water capture, cycling, and dispersal. Even economics and politics could be conducted on *wu wei* lines, where this would involve a decentralized approach, the nurturing, again, of local affordances: local knowledge and culture, local talent and intelligence, local initiative and responsibility, as well as local physical resources (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013).

Conclusion

The problem of dualism is indeed the pivot of ecofeminist theorizing which continues to be informed by the writings of Val Plumwood. But I have suggested in this chapter that, philosophically speaking, we cannot escape dualism merely by theoretically deconstructing it or by devising theoretical alternatives to it. Ecofeminism might rather be construed as primarily a discipline of practice, in the manner of traditions such as Daoism, which offer exercises aimed at the cultivation of consciousness rather than discourses that, by their very nature as discourses, perpetuate an underlying dualism of subject versus object. To devise such practices is not merely a matter of reviving, for normative purposes, traditional practices, such as those of women in the domestic sphere or of hunter-gatherer peoples in the subsistence sphere, but of developing contemporary modes of self- and social-cultivation conducive to strategic consciousness. Of course, a place may be – indeed, I think, must be – retained for theory, since in a culture already so profoundly shaped by theory, theory may be required to motivate us to undertake practices intended to transform consciousness. But it will be the practices themselves, re-engaging us with reality, which will release us from the grip of dualism with its unavoidable legacy of domination. Relying on critique and analysis alone may re-entrap us.

Notes

Some of the text in this chapter has been adapted by the author from Chapter 18, ‘Environmental Philosophy’, in N. N. Trakakis and G. Oppy (eds), *A History of Australasian Philosophy*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2014, pp. 543–591. Reprinted with permission from Springer.

- 1 For an excellent introduction to the history of environmental philosophy, see Brennan (2008).
- 2 The idea that the valorization of reason, under its dualist construction, was somehow tied up with transcendence of death was a theme to which Plumwood returned later in her career when, in a series of powerful articles on death and predation, she sought to re-situate death within ecology, finding consolation for mortality not in a ‘higher’ realm of abstract existence but in the material continuities of the life process itself. These papers were collected posthumously in Plumwood (2012).
- 3 See, for example, many passages elaborating this principle in the ancient Chinese text *I Ching*.
- 4 The fact that a keen aesthetic and spiritual appreciation for nature has always been a defining strand of Chinese civilization has not prevented China from degrading its environment over the millennia (Elvin 2004). But such damage has, until the advent of modernization in China, been inflicted for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. It might have been much more severe had it been ideologically mandated – as it became after the Communist revolution, when, under the influence of the West, Mao Zedong actually declared a ‘war on nature’.
- 5 I am not for a moment suggesting that hunting – a prime exercise in *strategia* in indigenous contexts – remains morally defensible as a practice in the radically altered circumstances of modern societies (Mathews 2012).

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