

THE CARTESIAN MASCULINIZATION OF THOUGHT

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On November 10, 1619, Descartes had a series of dreams—bizarre, richly imaginal sequences manifestly full of anxiety and dread. He interpreted these dreams—which most readers would surely regard as nightmares¹—as revealing to him that mathematics is the key to understanding the universe. Descartes' resolute and disconcertingly positive interpretation has become a standard textbook anecdote, a symbol of the seventeenth-century rationalist project. That project, in the official story told in most philosophy and history texts, describes seventeenth-century culture as Descartes described his dream: in terms of intellectual beginnings, fresh confidence, and a new belief in the ability of science—armed with the discourses of mathematics and the “new philosophy”—to decipher the language of nature.

The ideas in this paper have been presented in various forms and various contexts, from informal discussion to colloquium presentations to class lectures. To all my friends, colleagues, and students who have helped me explore and clarify those ideas, I express my appreciation. In particular, I would like to thank Mario Moussa and Carolyn Merchant for their insightful editorial suggestions and helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ For an account of these dreams, see Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman* (New York: Noonday Press, 1965), 80–84. Descartes' original account is, unfortunately, lost.

[Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1986, vol. 11, no. 3]
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Recent scholarship, however, has detected a certain instability, a dark underside, to the bold rationalist vision. Different writers describe it in different ways. Richard Bernstein speaks of the great “Cartesian anxiety” over the possibility of intellectual and moral chaos;² Karsten Harries speaks of the (Cartesian) “dread of the distorting power of perspective”;³ Richard Rorty reminds us that the seventeenth-century ideal of a perfectly mirrored nature is also an “attempt to escape” from history, culture, and human finitude.⁴ Looking freshly at Descartes’ *Meditations*, one cannot help but be struck by the manifest epistemological anxiety of the earlier *Meditations* and by how unresolute a mode of inquiry they embody: the dizzying vacillations, the constant questioning of the self, the determination, if only temporary, to stay within confusion and contradiction, to favor interior movement rather than clarity and resolve.

All that, of course, is ultimately left behind by Descartes, as firmly as his bad dreams (as he tells his correspondent, Elizabeth of Bohemia) were conquered by the vigilance of his reason. The model of knowledge that Descartes bequeathed to modern science, and of which he is often explicitly described as the father, is based on clarity, dispassion, and detachment. Yet the transformation from the imagery of nightmare (the *Meditations*’ demons, dreamers, and madmen) to the imagery of objectivity remains unconvincing. The sense of experience conveyed by the first two *Meditations*—what Karl Stern calls the sense of “reality founded on uncertainty”⁵—is not quite overcome for the reader by the positivity of the later *Meditations*. Descartes’ critics felt this in his own time. Over and over, the objection is raised: given the power of the first two *Meditations*, how can you really claim to have extricated yourself from the doubt and from the dream?

This instability was shared by the intellectual culture that Descartes was to transform so decisively. Indeed, I will propose in this essay that the *Meditations* be read as a mirror of that culture, a reflection both of its anxieties and its responses to those anxieties. I will further suggest that the categories of modern developmental psychology—specifically those that have developed around the issues of separation and individuation—can provide an illuminative psychocultural framework for a fresh reading of the *Meditations* and of the major philosophical and cultural transformations of the seventeenth century.

Drawing on the work of Margaret Mahler, Jean Piaget, and Norman O.

² Richard Bernstein, “Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind,” *Review of Metaphysics* 32, no. 4 (1980): 762.

³ Karsten Harries, “Descartes, Perspective and the Angelic Eye,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 49 (1973), 29.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 9.

⁵ Stern, 99.

Brown, I will undertake a reexamination of Cartesian doubt and of Descartes' seeming triumph over the epistemological insecurity of the first two *Meditations*. I will suggest that we view the "great Cartesian anxiety," although manifestly expressed in epistemological terms, as anxiety over separation—from the organic female universe of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Cartesian objectivism, correspondingly, will be explored as a defensive response to that separation anxiety, an aggressive intellectual "flight from the feminine" rather than (simply) the confident articulation of a positive new epistemological ideal. The more concrete, political, and institutional expressions of such a seventeenth-century flight from the feminine have been chronicled by a number of authors. This essay will explore its philosophical expression, in what I will describe as the Cartesian *re-birthing* and *re-imaging* of knowledge and the world as masculine.

The notion that the project of modern science crystallizes "masculinist" modes of thinking has been a prominent theme in some recent writing: "[What] we encounter in Cartesian rationalism," says Karl Stern, "is the pure masculinization of thought."⁶ The scientific model of knowing, says Sandra Harding, represents a "super-masculinization of rational knowledge."⁷ "The specific consciousness we call scientific, Western and modern," claims James Hillman, "is the long sharpened tool of the masculine mind that has discarded parts of its own substance, calling it 'Eve,' 'female' and 'inferior.'"⁸ Understanding the development of Cartesian objectivism, and modern science in general, in terms of the cultural "drama of parturition" described in this essay will give some textual and historical support to these insights and clarify their importance.

Separation and individuation themes in the *Meditations*

The need for God's guarantee, in the *Meditations*, is a need for a principle of continuity and coherence for what is experienced by Descartes as a disastrously fragmented and discontinuous mental life. For Descartes, indeed, discontinuity is the central fact of human experience. Nothing—neither certainty, nor temporal existence itself—endures past the present moment without God. Time—both external and internal—is so fragmented that "in order to secure the continued existence of a thing, no less a cause is required than that needed to produce it at the first."⁹ This means

⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁷ Sandra Harding, "Is Gender a Variable in Conceptions of Rationality?" (paper delivered at the Fifth International Colloquium on Rationality, Vienna, 1981).

⁸ James Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 250.

⁹ René Descartes, *Philosophical Works*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 2:56 (hereafter referred to as HR 1 and HR 2).

not only that our continued existence is causally dependent on God (HR 1:158–59), but that God is required to provide continuity and unity to our inner life as well. That inner life, without God, “is always of the present moment”;¹⁰ two and two may equal four right now, while we are attending to it, but we need God to assure us that two and two will always form four, whether we are attending to it or not. Even the most forcefully experienced insights—save the *cogito*—become open to doubt once the immediacy of the intuition passes:

For although I am of such a nature that as long as I understand anything very clearly and distinctly, I am naturally impelled to believe it to be true, yet because I am also of such a nature that I cannot have my mind constantly fixed on the same object in order to perceive it clearly, and as I often recollect having formed a past judgement without at the same time properly recollecting the reasons that led me to make it, it may happen meanwhile that other reasons present themselves to me, which would easily cause me to change my opinion, if I were ignorant of the facts of the existence of God, and thus I should have no true and certain knowledge, but only vague and vacillating opinion. [HR 1:183–84]

This strong sense of the fragility of human cognitive relations with the object world is closely connected to the new Cartesian sense (which Descartes shared with the culture around him) of what Stephen Toulmin has called “the inwardness of mental life”: the sense of experience as occurring deeply within and bounded by a self.¹¹ According to many scholars of the era, such a sense was not prominent in the medieval experience of the world:

When we think casually, we think of consciousness as situated at some point in space . . . even those who achieve the intellectual contortionism of denying that there is such a thing as consciousness, feel that this denial comes from inside their own skins. . . . This was not the background picture before the scientific revolution. The background picture then was of man as a microcosm within the macrocosm. It is clear that he did not feel himself isolated by his skin from the world outside to quite the same extent that we do. He was integrated or mortised into it, each different part of him being united to a different part of it by some invisible thread. In his

¹⁰ Poulet, quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 241.

¹¹ Stephen Toulmin, “The Inwardness of Mental Life,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (Autumn 1979): 1–16.

relation to his environment, the man of the middle ages was rather less like an island, rather more like an embryo.¹²

During the Renaissance, as Claudio Guillen argues, European culture became “interiorized.”¹³ The portrayal of the “inner life”—both as a dramatic problem and as a subject of literary exploration—becomes an issue. How can the playwright depict the experience of a character? In Shakespeare, a new theme emerges: the hidden substance of the self—the notion that the experience of individuals is fundamentally opaque, even inaccessible to others, who can only take an outer view of it. It is in the Renaissance, too, that philosophers begin to image mental life as an inner arena or space inside, deeply interior and, at the same time, capable of objectification and examination. Montaigne is a striking example: “I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy. . . . I look inside myself; I continually observe myself, I take stock of myself, I taste myself. . . . I roll about in myself.”¹⁴

The *Meditations*, however, in both form and content, remain the most thoroughgoing and compelling examples we have of confrontation with the “inwardness of mental life.” Augustine’s *Confessions* embody a stream of consciousness, to be sure, but they very rarely confront that stream as an object of exploration. Descartes provides the first real phenomenology of the mind, and one of the central results of that phenomenology is the disclosure of the deep epistemological alienation that attends the sense of mental interiority: the enormous gulf that must separate what is conceived as occurring “in here” from that which, correspondingly, must lie “out there.” The central inquiry of *Meditation 2*, and the first formulation of what was, unfortunately, to become the primary epistemological question for philosophers until Kant, is “whether any of the objects of which I have ideas *within me* exist *outside of me*” (HR 1:161; emphasis mine). Under such circumstances, *cogito ergo sum* is, indeed, the only emphatic reality, for to be assured of its truth, we require nothing but confrontation with the inner stream itself. Beyond the direct and indubitable “I am,” the meditation on the self can lead to no other truths without God to bridge the gulf between the “inner” and the “outer.”

Consider, in this connection, the difference between the ancient Greek and medieval view of the nature of error and the Cartesian view. For Descartes, error consists in the judgment that “inner” reality—modes of

¹² Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), 78.

¹³ Claudio Guillen, *Literature as System* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), 306–10.

¹⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. and ed. Donald Frame (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963), 273.

thought—"are similar or conformable to the things which are outside." (HR 1:160). For the Greeks and medievals, not only is such uncertainty about the capacity of the "inner" to lead reliably to the "outer" foreign, but the very notion of location in these matters is inappropriate. Reason was a human faculty, resisting metaphors of locatedness, neither inside nor outside the human being.¹⁵ Completely absent is the image, so striking in Montaigne and Galileo as well as Descartes, of an unreliable, distorting "inner space"; rather, there are two worlds (or, for Aristotle, it might be more correct to say two aspects of the same world) and two human faculties—intellect and sense—appropriate to each. Error is the result of confusion between these worlds—the sensible and the unchanging—not the result of inner misrepresentation of the "external" world.

For Descartes, contrastingly, an epistemological chasm separates a highly self-conscious self from a universe that now lies decisively outside the self. This profound Cartesian experience of self as inwardness ("I think, therefore I am") and its corollary—the heightened sense of distance from the "not-I"—inspires a more psychological consideration of the popular imagery that describes the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance in terms of birth.

Ortega y Gasset describes the "human drama which began in 1400 and ends in 1650" as a "drama of parturition."¹⁶ Arthur Koestler compares the finite universe to a nursery and later, to a womb.¹⁷ Owen Barfield, as we have seen, speaks of the medieval as an embryo. Such imagery may be more appropriate than any of these authors intended. As individuals, according to Margaret Mahler, our true psychological birth comes when we begin to experience our separateness from the mother, when we begin to individuate from her. That process, whose stages are described in detail by Mahler,¹⁸ involves a slowly unfolding reciprocal delineation of self and world. For Mahler (as for Piaget, in describing cognitive development), as subjectivity becomes ever more internally aware, so the object world (via its principal representative, the mother) becomes ever more external and autonomous. Thus, the normal adult experience or "being both fully 'in' and at the same time basically separate from the world out there" is developed from an original state of unity with the mother.¹⁹

This is not easy for the child, for every major step in the direction of individuation also revives an "eternal longing" for the "ideal state of self" in

¹⁵ In Greek, as Richard Rorty points out, there is no way to divide "conscious states" from events in an external world (Rorty [n. 4 above], 47).

¹⁶ José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis*, trans. Mildred Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1958), 184.

¹⁷ Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1959), 218.

¹⁸ Margaret Mahler, "On the First Three Phases of the Separation-Individuation Process," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 53 (1972): 333–38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

which mother and child were one and recognition of our ever-increasing distance from it. "Side by side with the growth of [the child's] emotional life, there is a noticeable waning . . . of his [previous] relative obliviousness to the mother's presence. Increased separation anxiety can be observed . . . [in] a seemingly constant concern with the mother's whereabouts."²⁰ Although we become more or less reconciled to our separateness, the process of individuation and its anxieties "reverberates throughout the life cycle. It is never finished, it can always be reactivated."²¹

May not such a process reverberate, too, on the cultural level? Perhaps some cultural eras compensate for the pain of individuation better than others through a mother imagery of the cosmos (such as was dominant, e.g., throughout the Chaucerian and Elizabethan eras) that assuages the anxiety of our actual separateness as individuals. On the other hand, during periods in which long-established images of symbiosis and cosmic unity break down (as they did during the period of the scientific revolution), may we not expect an increase in self-consciousness and anxiety over the distance between self and world—a constant concern, to paraphrase Mahler, over the whereabouts of the world? All these, as I have suggested, are central motifs in the *Meditations*.²²

Recall, in this connection, Descartes' concern over the inability of the mind to be "constantly fixed on the same object in order to perceive it

²⁰ Ibid., 337.

²¹ Ibid., 33.

²² It might be argued that theories of separation and individuation belong to a peculiarly modern discourse, one in which the very concept of self that was nascent and still tenuous in the Cartesian era is a fully developed given and central focus. Moreover, the dynamics of separation and individuation describe individual development on the level of infant object relations. These categories cannot be transported so glibly as to describe cultural developments in an advanced historical era. I do not wish to be understood as making any general theoretical claims about the relationship of phylogeny and ontogeny or any empirical claims about the actual evolutionary progress of the race. I take the psychology of infancy presented here not so much as a scientific theory—a genetic schema to be mapped onto the progress of events in a particular era—but more as a hermeneutic aid, which provides clues to interpreting cultural developments. My use of psychological categories forces us to recognize the thoroughly historical character of precisely those categories of self and innerness that describe the modern sense of relatedness to the world. They do so because they do not presuppose these categories as givens, but view them as developmental accomplishments. To be sure, the development that someone like Mahler has in mind is individual development. But the originally undifferentiated experience of the infant—the psychological/cognitive "state of nature" out of which we develop into fully separate, self-conscious beings—nonetheless argues for the possibility of human modes of relatedness to the world in which separateness of self and world is less sharply delineated than it is within the accepted norms of modern experience. Such modes, it has been suggested, were characteristic of the prescientific experience of the world. (See, in particular, Owen Barfield and Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* [New York: Cornell University Press, 1981].)

clearly" (and thus, without God's guarantee, to be assured only of "vague and vacillating opinion"; HR 1:183–84). The original model of epistemological security (which Descartes knows cannot be fulfilled—thus, the need for God) is a constant state of mental vigilance over the object; in the absence of that, nothing can be certain. To put this in more concrete terms: no previously reached conclusions, no past insights, no remembered information can be trusted. Unless the object is present and immediately in sight, it ceases to be available to the knower.

Consider this epistemological instability in connection with Piaget's famous experiments on the development of "permanent object concept" in children. From them, we learn that the developing child does not at first perceive objects as having enduring stability, "firm in existence though they do not directly affect perception." Instead, the object world is characterized by "continuous annihilations and resurrections," depending upon whether or not the object is within the child's perceptual field. When an object leaves the child's sight, it (effectively) leaves the universe.²³ In a sense, that is Descartes' dilemma, too, and the reason he needs God. This is not to say that Descartes saw the world as a child does. He, of course, had "permanent object concept." In speaking of perceiving objects, he is talking not about rudimentary perception but of the intellectual apprehension of the essences of things. The structural similarity between his "doubt by inattention" (as Robert Alexander calls it)²⁴ and the developing child's perceptual deficiencies is suggestive, however, of the newness, the tenuousness (albeit on a far more sophisticated plane than that of the child) of the Cartesian experience of self-confronting world. Neither the self nor objects are stable, and the lack of stability in the object world is, indeed, experienced as concern over the whereabouts of the world. Reunion with the (mother) world is, however, impossible; only God the father can now provide the (external) reassurance Descartes needs.

I have spoken of re-union here because (without making any unsupportable claims about how medievals "saw" the world) it seems clear that for the medieval aesthetic and philosophical imagination, the categories of self and world, inner and outer, human and natural were not as rigorously opposed as they came to be during the Cartesian era. The most striking evidence for this comes, not only from the organic, holistic imagery of the cosmos and the animistic science that prevailed until the seventeenth century,²⁵ but from medieval art as well. That art, which seems so distorted

²³ Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Random House, 1954), 103.

²⁴ Robert Alexander, "Metaphysical Doubt and Its Removal," in *Cartesian Studies*, ed. R. J. Butler (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972), 121.

²⁵ See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Morris Berman; and Brian Easlea, *Witch-Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980).

and spatially incoherent to a modern viewer, does so precisely because it does not represent the point of view of a detached, discretely located observer confronting a visual field of separate objects. The latter mode of representation—that of the perspective painting—had become the dominant artistic convention by the seventeenth century. In the medieval painting, by contrast, the fiction of the fixed beholder is entirely absent; instead, the spectator, as art historian Samuel Edgerton describes the process, is invited to become “absorbed within the visual world . . . to walk about, experiencing structures, almost tactilely, from many different sides, rather than from a single, overall vantage.”²⁶ Often, sides of objects that could not possibly be seen at once (from one perceptual point of view) are represented as though the (imagined) movement of the subject in relating to the object—touching it, considering it from all angles—constitutes the object itself. The re-created experience is of the world and self as an unbroken continuum.²⁷

Owen Barfield suggests that the reason perspective was not discovered before the Renaissance was because they did not need it: “Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved. In such a world the convention of perspective was unnecessary. . . . It was as if the observers were themselves in the picture. Compared with us, they felt themselves and the objects around them and the words that expressed those objects, immersed together in something like a clear lake of—what shall we say?—of ‘meaning,’ if you choose.”²⁸ By extreme contrast, consider Pascal’s despair at what seems to him an arbitrary and impersonal “allotment” in the “infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me. . . . There is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here?”²⁹ Pascal’s sense of homelessness and abandonment, his apprehension of an almost personal indifference on the part of the universe, is closely connected here to an acute anxiety at the experience of personal boundedness and locatedness, of “me-here-now” (and *only* “here-now”). A similar anxiety, as I have suggested, is at the heart of Descartes’ need for a God to sustain both his existence and his inner life from moment to moment, to provide a reassurance of permanence and connection between self and world. Once, such connection had not been in question.

²⁶ Samuel Edgerton, Jr., *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 9. See this work for an excellent discussion of the contrasting aesthetic spaces of medieval and Renaissance art and the different perceptual world suggested by them.

²⁷ The correspondence between central features of the pictorial space of medieval art and the real perceptual space of children, as studied by Piaget, are striking and suggestive.

²⁸ Barfield (n. 12 above), 94–95.

²⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 68.

Cultural re-birth: The “father of oneself” fantasy

If a kind of Cartesian ideal were ever completely fulfilled, i.e., if the whole of nature were only what can be explained in terms of mathematical relationships—then we would look at the world with that fearful sense of alienation, with that utter loss of reality with which a future schizophrenic child looks at his mother. A machine cannot give birth. [Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman*]

Descartes envisages for himself a kind of rebirth. Intellectual salvation comes only to the twice-born. [Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen*]³⁰

The dialectics of separation and individuation offer a way of seeing the Cartesian era empathically and impressionistically, through association and image, allowing the psychological categories normally reserved for our understanding of individuals to come alive on the level of history and culture. As such, they become a means of imaginative rehabilitation of the psychological values that mediate and “deepen” events (as James Hillman puts it),³¹ which makes them resonate in a particular way for the human beings living them. The story that emerges through such an imaginative rehabilitation of the Cartesian era is a drama of parturition—from a universe that had ceased to beat with the same heart as the human being long before Descartes declared it to be pure *res extensa*.

If then, the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance can be looked on as a kind of protracted birth—from which the human being emerges as a decisively separate entity, no longer continuous with the universe with which it had once shared a soul—so the possibility of objectivity, strikingly, is conceived by Descartes as a kind of *re*-birth, on one’s own terms, this time.

Most of us are familiar with the dominant Cartesian themes of starting anew, alone, without influence from the past or other people, with the guidance of reason alone. The product of our original and actual birth, childhood, being ruled by the body, is the source of all obscurity and confusion in our thinking. For, as body, we are completely reactive and nondiscriminative, unable to make the most basic distinctions between an inner occurrence and an external event. One might say, in fact, that the distinction has no meaning at all for the body. This is why infancy—when the mind, “newly united” to the body, was “swamped” or “immersed” within it (HR 1:237)—is for Descartes primarily a period of egocentrism (in

³⁰ Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 16.

³¹ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), x.

the Piagetian sense): of complete inability to distinguish between subject and object. It is this feature of infancy that is responsible for all the “childhood prejudices” that later persist in the form of adult philosophical confusion between primary and secondary qualities, the “preconceptions of the senses,” and the dictates of reason. As children, we judged subjectively, determining “that there was more or less reality in each body, according as the impressions made [on our own bodies] were more or less strong. So, we attributed much greater reality to rocks than air, believed the stars were actually as small as “tiny lighted candles,” and believed that heat and cold were properties of the objects themselves (HR 1:250). These “prejudices” stay with us, “we quite forget we had accepted them without sufficient examination, admitting them as though they were of perfect truth and certainty”; thus, “it is almost impossible that our judgments should be as pure and solid as they would have been if we had had complete use of our reason since birth and had never been guided except by it” (HR 1:88).

It is crucial to note that it is the lack of differentiation between subject and object, between self and world, that is construed here as the epistemological threat. The medieval sense of relatedness to the world had not depended on such “objectivity” but on continuity between the human and physical realms, on the interpenetrations, through meanings and associations, of self and world.³² Now, a clear and distinct sense of the boundaries of the self has become the ideal; the lingering of infantile subjectivism has become the impediment to solid judgment. The state of childhood, moreover, can be revoked through a deliberate and methodical reversal of all the prejudices of childhood—and one can begin anew with reason as one’s only parent. This is precisely what the *Meditations* attempt to do.

The precise form of our infantile prejudices, as we have seen, is the inability to distinguish properly what is happening solely “inside” the subject from what has an external existence. “Swamped” inside the body, one simply did not have a perspective from which to discriminate, to examine, to judge. In *Meditation 1*, Descartes re-creates that state of utter entrapment by luring the reader through the continuities between madness, then dreaming—that state each night when each of us loses our adult clarity and detachment—and finally to the possibility that the whole of our existence may be like a dream, a grand illusion so encompassing that there is no conceivable perspective from which to judge its correspondence with reality. This, in essence, is the Evil Demon hypothesis—a specter of complete enclosedness and entrapment within the self. The difference, of course, is that in childhood, we assumed that what we felt was a measure of external reality; now, as mature Cartesian doubters, we reverse that

³² This is not the place to detail or defend this characterization of the medieval sense of relatedness to the world, about which much has been written. See Barfield; and C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

prejudice. We assume nothing. We refuse to let our bodies mystify us: "I shall close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses" (HR 1:157). We begin afresh. The result, in the *Meditations*, is a securing of all the boundaries that, in childhood, are so fragile: between the "inner" and the "outer," between the subjective and the objective, between self and world.

The separation of knower from known, which modern philosophy and science came to regard as a given—a condition for knowledge—was for Descartes a project, not a foundation, to be discovered. Crucial to that project was the Cartesian refashioning of the ontological orders of the human and the natural into two distinct substances—the spiritual and the corporeal—that share no qualities (other than being created), permit of interaction but no merging, and, indeed, are each defined precisely in opposition to the other (HR 1:190). The mutual exclusion of *res extensa* and *res cogitans* made possible the conceptualization of complete intellectual transcendence of the body, organ of the deceptive senses and distracting "commotion" in the heart, blood, and animal spirits. (The body, as we have seen, is the chief impediment to human objectivity, for Descartes.) It also established the utter diremption—detachment, dislocation—of the natural world from the realm of the human. It now became inappropriate to speak, as the medievals had done, in anthropocentric terms about nature, which for Descartes, is pure *res extensa*, totally devoid of mind and thought. More important, it means that the values and significances of things in relation to the human realm must now be understood as purely a reflection of how we feel about them, having nothing to do with their "objective" qualities. "Thus," says Whitehead in his famous sardonic criticism of seventeenth-century philosophy, "the poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation. . . . Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly."³³ For the model of knowledge that results, neither bodily response (the sensual or the emotional) nor associational thinking, exploring the various personal or spiritual meanings the object has for us, can tell us anything about the object "*itself*." That can only be grasped, as Charles Gillispie puts it, "by measurement rather than sympathy."³⁴

It is in this sense that the dominant philosophic and scientific culture of the seventeenth century indeed inaugurated "a truly masculine birth of time," as Francis Bacon proclaimed it.³⁵ The notion has been fleshed out by

³³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1925; reprint, Toronto: Collier Macmillan, 1967), 54.

³⁴ Charles Gillispie, *The Edge of Objectivity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 42.

³⁵ Francis Bacon, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, ed. B. Farrington (Liverpool: Liver-

a number of feminist writers.³⁶ Here “masculine” describes not a biological category but a cognitive style, an epistemological stance. Its key term is *detachment*: from the emotional life, from the particularities of time and place, from personal quirks, prejudices, and interests, and most centrally, from the object itself. This masculine orientation toward knowledge, which Evelyn Fox Keller sees epitomized in the modern scientific ideal of objectivity, depends on a clear and distinct determination of the boundaries between self and world: “The scientific mind is set apart from what is to be known, that is, from nature, and its autonomy is guaranteed . . . by setting apart its modes of knowing from those in which that dichotomy is threatened. In this process, the characterization of both the scientific mind and its modes of access to knowledge as masculine is indeed significant. Masculine here connotes, as it so often does, autonomy, separation, and distance . . . a radical rejection of any comingling of subject and object.”³⁷ Situating this masculine birth—or more precisely, *re*-birth—within the context of the cultural separation anxieties described earlier, it appears not only as an intellectual orientation but as a mode of denial as well, a reaction formation to the loss of “being-one-with-the-world” brought about by the disintegration of the organic, centered cosmos of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The Cartesian reconstruction of the world is a defiant gesture of independence from the female cosmos—a gesture that is at the same time compensation for a profound loss.

The project of growing up, as developmental theorists emphasize, is primarily a project of separation, of learning to deal with the fact that mother and child are no longer one.³⁸ One mode of dealing with that separation is through the denial of any longing for that lost union through an assertion of self against the mother and all that she represents and a rejection of all dependency on her. In this way, the pain of separateness is assuaged, paradoxically, by an even more definitive separation—but one that is chosen this time and aggressively pursued. It is therefore experienced as autonomy rather than helplessness in the face of the discontinuity between self and mother.

Within the context of such ideas, Norman O. Brown reinterprets the oedipal desire to possess the mother sexually as a fantasy of “becoming the

pool University Press, 1970), 130. For discussions of Bacon’s use of sexual metaphors, see Carolyn Merchant (n. 25 above), 164–90; Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 33–42; Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 10–17.

³⁶ On science and the masculine, see esp. Keller. On masculinity as a cognitive style, see esp. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

³⁷ Keller, 79.

³⁸ Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death* (New York: Random House, 1959).

father of oneself" (rather than the helpless child of the mother).³⁹ Sexual activity here (or, rather, the fantasy of it) becomes a means of denying the actual passivity of having been born from that original state of union into "a body of limited powers, and a time and place [one] never chose,"⁴⁰ and at the mercy of the now-alien will of the mother. The mother is still "other," but she is an other whose power has been harnessed by the will of the child. The pain of separateness is thus compensated for by the peculiar advantages of separateness: the possibility of mastery and control over those on whom one is dependent.

The Cartesian project of starting anew through the revocation of one's actual childhood—during which one was "immersed" in body and nature—and the re-creation of a world in which absolute separateness (both epistemological and ontological) from body and nature are keys to control rather than sources of anxiety, can be seen as a "father of oneself" fantasy on a highly abstract plane. The sundering of the organic ties between person and nature—originally experienced as epistemological estrangement, as the opening up of a chasm between self and world—is reenacted, this time with the human being as the engineer and architect of the separation.

A new theory of knowledge, thus, is born, one which regards all sense experience as illusory and insists that the object can only truly be known by the perceiver who is willing to purge the mind of all obscurity, all irrelevancy, all free imaginative associations, and all passionate attachments. (This Descartes believed eminently possible, given the right method: "Even those who have the feeblest souls can acquire a very absolute dominion over all their passions if sufficient industry is applied in training and guiding them" [HR 1:356].) A new world is constructed, one in which all generativity and creativity fall to God the spiritual father rather than to the female flesh of the world. For Plato and Aristotle, and throughout the Middle Ages, the natural world has been "mother"—passive, receptive, *natura naturata* to be sure, but living and breathing nonetheless.⁴¹ Now, in the same brilliant stroke that insured the objectivity of science—the mutual opposition of the spiritual and the corporeal—the formerly female earth becomes inert *res extensa*: dead, mechanically interacting matter.

"She" becomes "it"—and "it" can be understood. Not through sympathy, of course, but by virtue of the very *object*-ivity of the "it." At the same time, the wound of separateness is healed through the denial that there ever was any union: for the mechanists, unlike Donne, the female world-soul did not die; rather, the world *is* dead. There is nothing to mourn, nothing to lament. Indeed, the new epistemological anxiety is not

³⁹ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 146.

⁴¹ See esp. Plato, *Timaeus*; and Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, 72a222. For an excellent discussion of the imagery of earth as mother, see Carolyn Merchant.

over loss but is evoked by the memory or suggestion of union: empathic, associational, or emotional response obscures objectivity, feeling for nature muddies the clear lake of the mind. The otherness of nature is now what allows it to be known.

The seventeenth-century flight from the feminine

The historical research of such writers as Carolyn Merchant, Brian Easlea, Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English, and Adrienne Rich has forced us to recognize the years between 1550 and 1650 as a particularly gynophobic century. The prevailing ideas of the era now appear as obsessed with the untamed natural power of female generativity and a dedication to bringing it under forceful cultural control. Nightmare fantasies of female power over reproduction and birth run throughout the era, from Kramer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum*, which accuses witches of every imaginable natural and supernatural crime involving conception and birth, to Boyle's characterization of nature as "God's great pregnant Automaton,"⁴² whose secrets are deliberately and slyly concealed from the scientist. There were the witch hunts themselves, which, aided more politely by the gradual male takeover of birthing, virtually purged the healing arts of female midwives.⁴³ The resulting changes in obstetrics came to identify birth—as Bacon identified nature itself—with the potentiality of disorder and the need for forceful male control.⁴⁴

It was not only in practice that women were being denied an active role in the processes of conception and birth. Mechanist reproductive theory as well had "happily" (as Easlea sarcastically puts it) made it "no longer necessary to refer to any women" at all in its descriptions of conception and gestation.⁴⁵ Denied even her limited, traditional Aristotelian role of supplying (living) menstrual material, the woman becomes instead the mere container for the temporary housing and incubation of already formed human beings, originally placed in Adam's semen by God and parcelled out, over the ages, to all his male descendants. The specifics of mechanistic reproductive theory are a microcosmic recapitulation of the mechanistic vision itself, within which God the father is the sole creative, formative principle in the cosmos. We know, from what now must be seen as almost paradigmatic examples of the power of belief over perception, that tiny

⁴² Quoted in Easlea (n. 25 above), 214.

⁴³ See in particular Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English, *For Her Own Good* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1979), 33–68; and Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 124–48.

⁴⁴ Rich, 133.

⁴⁵ Easlea, 49.

horses and men were actually “seen” by mechanist scientists examining sperm under their microscopes.⁴⁶

What can account for this upsurge of fear of female generativity? No doubt many factors—economic, political, and institutional—are crucial; but the “drama of parturition” described in connection with Descartes can provide an illuminative psychocultural framework within which to situate seventeenth-century gynophobia.

The culture in question, in the wake of the dissolution of the medieval intellectual and imaginative system, had lost a world in which the human being could feel nourished by the sense of oneness, of continuity between all things. The new, infinite universe was an indifferent home, an alien will, and the sense of separateness from her was acute. Not only was she “other” but she seemed a perverse and uncontrollable other: during the years 1550–1650, a century that had brought the worst food crisis in history, violent wars, plague, and devastating poverty, the Baconian imagery of nature as an unruly and malevolent virago is no paranoid fantasy. More important, the cruelty of the world could no longer be made palatable by the old medieval sense of organic justice—that is, justice on the level of the workings of a whole with which one’s identity merged and that, while perhaps not fully comprehensible, was nonetheless to be trusted. Now there seemed no organic unity, but only “I” and “she”—an unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary “she” whose actions could not be understood in any of the old, sympathetic ways.

“She” is “other”; and “otherness” itself becomes dreadful—particularly the otherness of the female, whose powers have always been mysterious to men and evocative of the mystery of existence itself. Like the infinite universe, which threatens to swallow the individual “like a speck,”⁴⁷ the female, with her strange rhythms, long acknowledged to have their chief affinities with the rhythms of the natural (now alien) world, becomes a reminder of how much lies outside the grasp of man. “The quintessential incarnation” of that which appears to man as “mysterious, powerful and not himself,” as de Beauvoir says, is “the woman’s fertile body.”⁴⁸ Now, with the universe appearing to man more decisively “not-himself” than ever before, both its mystery and the mystery of the female require a more decisive “solution” than had been demanded by the organic worldview.

The project that fell to empirical science and “rationalism” was to tame the female universe. Empirical science did this through aggressive assault and violation of her “secrets”; rationalism, through the philosophical neutralization of her vitality. The barrenness of matter correlatively insured

⁴⁶ For an extremely interesting discussion of this, see Hillman, “On Psychological Femininity,” in *The Myth of Analysis* (n. 8 above), 215–58.

⁴⁷ Pascal (n. 30 above), 59.

⁴⁸ De Beauvoir, 125.

the revitalization of human hope of conquering nature (through knowledge in this case rather than through force). The mystery of the female, however, could not be bent to man's control simply through philosophical means, more direct and concrete means of "neutralization" were required for that project. It is within this context that witch hunting and the male takeover of the processes of reproduction and birth, whatever their social and political causes, can be seen to have a profound psychocultural dimension as well.

The contemporary revaluation of the feminine

The recent scholarly emergence and revaluation of epistemological and ethical perspectives that have been identified as feminine in classical as well as contemporary writing (as, e.g., in the work of Carol Gilligan, Sarah Ruddick, and Nancy Chodorow) claim a natural foundation for knowledge, not in detachment and distance, but in closeness, connectedness, and empathy. They find the failure of connection (rather than the blurring of boundaries) as the principle cause of breakdown in understanding.

An appreciation of the historical nature of the masculine model of knowledge to which this "different voice" is often contrasted helps to underscore that the embodiment of these gender-related perspectives in actual men and women is a cultural, not a biological, phenomenon. There have been cultures in which (using our terms now, not theirs) men thought more like women, and there may be a time in the future when they do so again. For the prescientific understanding of the world, detachment is not an epistemological value. Rather, it is precisely because the scientific and intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth century changed that, that we can today describe those revolutions as effecting a "masculinization" of thought. The conclusion is not, however, that the categories of "masculinity" and "femininity" are mythologies, useless and reactionary hypostatizations. The sexual division of labor within the family in the modern era has indeed fairly consistently reproduced these gender-related perspectives along sexual lines. The central importance of Nancy Chodorow's work, for example, has been to show that boys tend to grow up learning to experience the world like Cartesians, while girls do not, because of developmental asymmetries resulting from female-dominated infant care, rather than from biology, anatomy, or "nature."

This sociological emphasis and understanding of gender as a social construction is one crucial difference between the contemporary feminist revaluation of the "feminine" and the nineteenth-century doctrine of female moral superiority. A still more central difference is the contemporary feminist emphasis on the insufficiency of any ethics or rationality—feminine or masculine—that operates solely in one mode without drawing

on the resources and perspective of the other.⁴⁹ The nineteenth-century celebration of a distinctively feminine sensibility and morality, by contrast, functioned in the service of pure masculinized thought by defining itself as a separate entity. This was, of course, precisely what the seventeenth-century masculinization of thought had accomplished—the exclusion of feminine modes of knowing, not from culture in general, but from the scientific and philosophical arenas, whose objectivity and purity needed to be guaranteed. Romanticizing “the feminine” within its own sphere is no alternative to Cartesianism because it suggests that the feminine has a “proper” (domestic) place. If Dorothy Dinnerstein and others are right, it is precisely the suppression of the feminine that is the deepest root of our modern cultural woes.⁵⁰ The historical identification of rationality and intelligence with the masculine modes of detachment, distance, and clarity has disclosed its limitations, and it is necessary (and inevitable) that feminine modes should now appear as revealing more innovative, more humane, and more hopeful perspectives. Clearly, the (unmythologizing) articulation of “the feminine”—and its potential contribution to ethics, epistemology, science, education, and politics—is one of the most important movements of the twentieth century.

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⁴⁹ See esp. the final chapter in Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, 151–74. In this chapter, it becomes clear that Gilligan is calling, not for a feminization of knowledge, from which more masculinist modes are excluded, but for the recognition that each mode, cut off from the other, founders on its own particular reefs, just as it offers its own partial truths about human experience. See also Keller's discussion of “dynamic autonomy,” 95–126 (n. 35 above).

⁵⁰ Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). See also Hillman, “On Psychological Femininity.”