

## Women's Philosophy Review

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## WOMEN'S PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

no 29 2002

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**Hanneke Canters (1969–2002)**

**EDITORIALS****Reflections on Embodiment**

By Pamela Sue Anderson

Embodiment is the underlying theme of this special edition of *Women's Philosophy Review*, forming the thread which clearly knits the pieces together. Vulnerability, submission, subjection, sexuality, sex, the sacred, love, longing, horrendous evils, desire, death, birth, beauty, ageing and abjection are each addressed here as philosophical topics bound up with our bodies as women, as women in philosophy and/or in religion. It is my hope that the topics shaping this edition of WPR on philosophy of religion will interest and surprise women in philosophy, whether they 'do' philosophy of religion or not. The contributions, reviews, and books under review come from women (and one man, Mark D. Jordan, author of *The Ethics of Sex*) who have at least one foot in philosophy, but who are also often working across disciplines: philosophy and theology, philosophy and religious studies, French or English literature and philosophy, gender studies and philosophy, psycholinguistics and philosophy. These contributors to philosophical debate have been selected at different stages of their careers; they represent different generations of feminism, and different experiences, rendering a great variety of content for women's writings in philosophy of religion. And yet each of these women in this edition confront philosophical issues to do with our bodily lives—their approaches to embodiment often reflecting their stage in life, their age, class and social identity or position.

From my own experience of women in philosophy, not many of us fail to have some opinions or views when it comes to the field of philosophy of religion. Women philosophers are often either strongly

for (wanting to prove themselves) or *against* working in this field, in which men have excelled at conceptual analysis, logical proofs, and abstract theories about warrant or justification of belief. This philosophical field has provided nice, neat parameters for many philosophers who enjoy developing and exercising their analytical and argumentative skills. But what of the content of their analyses, proofs and theories? The content, i.e. traditional theism (including its central concepts and issues), has been treated either with the utmost seriousness, or as having the least possible relevance by contrast to the seriousness of the skills practised. So what would make women want to engage in this philosophical sport? Perhaps it is to confront the serious nature of the material which has been excluded, devalued and repressed by what might have been thought to be just a bit of fun, or possibly, just a topic for men after dinner; but it is also to grapple philosophically with matters of religious belief (and not just exclusion).

Michèle Le Doeuff creates a witty picture of women in philosophy, possessing the desire to develop freedom, to seek truth and a new cognition—this despite the inherited image of woman, since Eve ate the apple in the Garden of Eden, as a temptress who leads men into sin, not knowledge (Le Doeuff 1998). In her words, 'it is just the right time for women to take over and in fact rescue a position which lacks inheritors (*qui tombe en déchéance!*)' (Le Doeuff 2000, 237) It is my belief and hope that women in philosophy (of religion) have begun to take part in this rescue operation. Le Doeuff herself reclaims women's inheritance in the work of the seventeenth-century philosopher, Gabrielle Suchon, whose reading of the narrative of Adam and Eve gives rational authority back to Eve and her descendants. But Le Doeuff would also support a positive reading of Simone de Beauvoir, whose inheritance for women philosophers has been obscured by negative, derivative or distorted readings of her accounts of embodiment.

Going against the latter popular trend, which has missed de Beauvoir's real insight, Jean Grimshaw can be placed alongside Le Doeuff in her concern to retrieve a woman who continues to offer us profound

understanding of our struggles with embodiment. In particular, Grimshaw's reading of de Beauvoir uncovers positive, yet realistic insight concerning the temporal conditions of women and men as they change, decline and experience the dislocation of time. Grimshaw does not side with overly positive accounts of ageing, especially if those accounts are merely reactions to what is assumed to be de Beauvoir's account of a negative and depressing condition. Instead, Grimshaw demonstrates the ways in which we can face what de Beauvoir identified as the *unrealizable*, i.e. what cannot be grasped in the inevitable shrinking of time and shortening of the future, without a naïve rejection of the harsh realities of growing old.

Although de Beauvoir, Le Doeuff and Grimshaw do not place themselves in relation to philosophy of religion, they each give content to the real life concerns which are in fact at the heart of recent debates by women in this field. Alison Martin in her review of *French Feminists on Religion* confirms the need to re-assess an insistence on the unwanted maternity, or dis-inheritance mentioned above, of de Beauvoir's philosophy, by those who follow the so-called holy trinity of French feminism, i.e. Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous. Preoccupations with 'the symbolic', as opposed to the material conditions, shaping our lives seem counter-productive for women in philosophy who seek to reclaim their embodiment. This reclamation needs to include the concrete dimensions of those lives which have been excluded and devalued, especially by certain orthodox readings of the Christian tradition.

The orthodox tradition of Christianity, or a continuing obsession with it, is clearly challenged by the sharp exchange of emails and letters between Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clément in *The Feminine and the Sacred*. Nevertheless, Alison Jasper's nuanced review of their often acerbic dialogue takes very seriously the energy and engaging material generated by Clément, granddaughter of Russian Jewish holocaust victims, and Kristeva, daughter of the tradition of Roman Catholic Orthodoxy in Bulgaria under oppressive communist rule. Again, the cultural inheritance of women in religion and in philosophy is brought into question.

tion. Has religion only added to women's disinheritance? Jasper recognizes the tension between the material and the symbolic focus of these polemical reflections on the sacred. Furthermore, she does not shy away from the heart of the problem of religion(s) for women: the sacred fits all too easily into a model that focuses on violent sacrifice, lack and abjection—of the feminine. How can women in philosophy gain recognition, respect and rational authority, whether as credible knowers, rational agents or competent judges, if their commitment to religious traditions continues to undermine their very embodiment as female subjects?

This special edition of *WPR* is meant to initiate lively—and, possibly, witty—polemics, but also serious and significant reflections about philosophy and its relation to religious traditions. Ultimately, a fundamental question indicates the rub of the matter: does acceptance of traditional Christianity as the source and content of philosophy of religion mean that the female philosopher is forced to theorize or submit to the power of the tradition of men in philosophy?

Women philosophers might trace women's disinheritance in western philosophy, especially by the orthodox readings of the biblical tradition, back to misogynist readings of Eve. However, in *Powers and Submissions*, Sarah Coakley argues forcefully and incisively that women can find power in *submission*. This may sound contradictory (and dangerous), but Coakley is not alone in her argument. Susan Parsons accepts *subjection* to the mother church. In other words, both Coakley and Parsons intend to reconcile their position as women thinkers—and indeed, as feminist philosophers—with the Christian church (Anglican and Roman Catholic, respectively) by relinquishing themselves to divine power; but this clearly poses a problem for the idea of female autonomy. According to Daphne Hampson's review of *The Ethics of Gender*, Parsons would seem to 'throw in the sponge' in passive acceptance of a patriarchal institution: in 'giving in', she is like Coakley, of whom Hampson has been equally critical elsewhere (cf. Hampson 1996, 121–2).

So, is there power in either 'submission' or 'subjection' to religion? An affirmative answer may try to express a postmodern irony; yet it is not obvious how we can make sense of a feminist version of radical orthodoxy which (re)turns us to a stage of selfless heteronomy. A philosopher, whether male or female, will feel uncomfortable with the contradictions of gaining-losing agency, especially, if women are only just gaining their own sense of autonomy.

Hampson, herself a post-Christian, presents cogent arguments against Christianity on the grounds of the inherent inequality of the sexes represented paradigmatically in God becoming a man, not a woman. The question is whether certain younger women would seek to side with Coakley and Parsons in their allegiance to traditional Christianity and philosophy. I wager that many women in philosophy will inevitably have difficulties accepting the blatant contradictions which postmodern theorists may be willing to embrace—and often celebrate. Clare Saunders would seem to be an example of a young woman who has worked to defend a philosophical (naturalist) conception of rationality, while retaining a Christian integrity. Saunders' incisive review, in this issue, of Jordan's *The Ethics of Sex* confronts a postmodern tendency to eclipse not only the arguments and rigour of modern philosophy, but the claims of Christianity in the name of 'Christian ethics'. In her critique, Saunders upholds the analytical skills of a rational and responsible subject.

Certainly, from the above, we can already see that women's philosophical concerns do not remain within the traditional framework of philosophy of religion. Yet their debates about embodiment maintain the pulse of serious philosophy for women seeking to shape the relatively new field of feminist philosophy of religion. To resist a negative note, or an oppositional tone, I direct you to Harriet Harris's introductory essay to follow. Harris is a philosopher of religion who presents a theological account of how religion is transformative for women's lives. As an ordained Christian minister, Harris engages seriously and critically with both Grace Jantzen's retrieval of the spiritual

longing of Julian of Norwich, and Beverley Clack's restoration of the concrete reality of birth and death.

Whatever their background, women in philosophy cannot afford to turn away from the lived experiences which disturb and disrupt us all. Grimshaw's rescue of de Beauvoir's understanding of the unrealizable offers an especially rich source for critical reflection upon our lives. In this light, consider the words of the social philosopher, Gillian Rose, whose life was prematurely cut short by cancer:

I like to pass unnoticed, which is why I hope that I am not deprived of old age. I aspire ... to be exactly as I am, decrepit nature, yet supernature in one, equally alert on the damp ground and in the turbulent air. Perhaps I don't have to wait for old age for that invisible trespass and pedestrian tread, insensible of mortality and desperately mortal (Rose 1995, 134–5).

We are dedicating this special issue on philosophy of religion to the memory of Hanneke Canters, a feminist philosopher of religion. She was an active member of SWIP and worked with Pamela Sue Anderson and Grace M. Jantzen. Hanneke died an untimely death on 6 September 2002. Her distinctive enthusiasm for philosophy will continue to inspire those of us who knew her, whether as her mentors or her peers, for she challenged us to think and feel as uniquely embodied women.

Pamela Sue Anderson,  
Regent's Park College,  
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## Introductory Essay: Philosophy of Religion

By Harriet A. Harris

The philosophy of religion is practised vibrantly in contexts coloured by all of the world's faiths, but the discipline as represented in this issue is practised primarily in relation to Christianity. This reflects what is typically the case in philosophy of religion in the Western world where even those philosophers who are or have at some time been atheists (such as J. L. Mackie, Anthony Flew, and more recently Brian Clack) are usually Christian atheists. It is the Christian God whom they are rejecting. Most conferences, edited volumes and textbooks in philosophy of religion assume a Christian theological framework. However, they are often not explicit about this. It is common for arguments for the existence of God or addressing the problem of evil, for example, to be debated as though these matters could be theologically neutral, or as though the debate should not be affected until some quite advanced stage by how theological traditions conceive God's relation to the world or divine responses to suffering.

With the exception of Jean Grimshaw who does not situate herself in relation to a religious tradition, the contributors to this issue and the authors whose books are reviewed here are explicit about their Christian or post-Christian context. This renders their work more consciously theological than most work in philosophy of religion. They engage with questions about the physical world as locus of divine presence and, indirectly, with the implications of the incarnation for our configuring of flesh and matter. Indeed, the issue that links each of our three main articles is that of embodiment. This focus is a reaction against dominant strands of the Christian tradition that have denigrated the flesh and played a role alongside influential strands of Greek philosophy in shaping Western philosophy's suspicion of the body. The image of the

soul ascending towards God leaving behind all that is earthly and bodily looms large in the Christian cultural psyche. As Martha Nussbaum writes: 'The very metaphor of ascent suggests to us that there is something low about where we usually live and are' (Nussbaum 2001, 681). Grace Jantzen and Beverley Clack both aim to locate the divine precisely where we live and have our being. One question then, is whether resources can be found within the Christian theological tradition for so locating the divine, and if so, what this might mean for women practising the philosophy of religion.

One might imagine that since Christianity is the religion of the incarnation, of God becoming enfleshed, locating the divine amongst our bodily selves ought to be straightforward. Yet we know that the Christian tradition has more often created an ambivalence about the flesh rather than a sanctifying of it. Nussbaum traces numerous accounts from Western philosophers, novelists, poets and composers all of which 'wish to rise above ... the everyday functions of life and everyday objects, from mud, hair and dirt, as the Platonist would say'. This means, Nussbaum goes on to say, that:

despite a general agreement in the Christian and post-Christian accounts that a truly adequate love will embrace the flaws and imperfections of a human being as well as the goodness—all of these ascents in a real sense repudiate us. Nobody has a menstrual period in Plato. Nobody excretes in Spinoza. Nobody masturbates in Proust. ... Augustine and Dante record such moments, but leave them behind in hell. (Nussbaum 2001, 681)

Such a heritage leaves us wondering whether it is possible for women to find resources in religion, and specifically within Christianity, that can be put to transformative, liberative purposes. The post-Christian theologian Daphne Hampson sees the very idea of incarnation as yet another spirit-flesh or Word-flesh binary, as she writes in her review of Susan Parson's book *The Ethics of Gender*. Catherine Clément asks Julia Kristeva whether waste, with its feminine and bodily associations, finds a place within the

divine universe of the Western world, given Christianity's preoccupation with healing the unclean. Their correspondence is reviewed here by Alison Jasper.

But can we interpret Christ's healing the unclean, for example, in ways that reinstate rather than eradicate the 'mud, hair and dirt' of our bodily existence? Arguably, Christ's healing of the 'unclean' was primarily social. Most biblical commentators today understand the healings that way. That is to say that a wholeness of healing came not because Jesus cured people's leprosy, or blindness, or stopped the bleeding woman's flow of blood, but because he physically touched and socially embraced these people whom the religious tradition of his day literally would not touch. He thereby brought them out of their exile and instituted them back into society. The unclean were healed fully by being declared clean, not by being purified. (In some cases they were not ritually purified.) This was revolutionary, and a major cause of Jesus' disputes with the religious authorities. Declaring clean that which has been seen as 'unclean' is transformative work of liberative revolutionary potential.

Grace Jantzen reminds us at the end of her paper that, 'transformation is what feminism—and religion—are all about' (44). How far might women philosophers draw on theological resources in their critique and practice of philosophy of religion? Sarah Coakley, whose book *Powers and Submissions* is reviewed by Morwenna Ludlow in this issue, is a philosophical theologian. It would not be sufficient to describe her only as a philosopher. The same holds for Janet Martin Soskice. Coakley and Soskice together provide the best examples in feminist philosophy of religion of the insights afforded through being theologically and historically acquainted with the Christian tradition, and of being practitioners of the spiritual life within that tradition. In a well-known essay called 'Love and Attention', published ten years ago, Soskice pitched one strand of Christian tradition, which has sought to disengage the self from the disenchanted universe, against other strands of Christian tradition that call us to attentiveness to the physical needs of those around us. The strands of tradition upon which she draws configure God as one who directs 'a

just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (Soskice 1992, 60). God's loving and attentive gaze is a very different image from that of the detached 'God's-eye view' that informs the work of many philosophers of religion (Taliaferro 1998, 206–10).

Soskice is querying the classical conception of God as all-seeing, all-knowing, disembodied, immutable, impassable, and impartial, or what Grace Jantzen refers to as 'the omni-everything patriarch of "classical theism"' (26). This construct is what Pascal had called the 'God of the philosophers' as opposed to the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. Not that a turn to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the other patriarchs would assuage feminist disapproval! Appealing to the God of the theologians over above the Bible, or the God of Israel, or the God of the theologians over above the God of the philosophers does not alleviate feminist suspicions. There are substantial grounds for feminist objections to what Jantzen calls 'conventional theology', some of which are documented in book reviews in this issue. Catherine Clément warns Julia Kristeva about giving too much value to the Christian tradition, because, as Alison Jasper writes, Christianity's version of the sacred fits all too easily with a model that focuses on violent sacrifice, lack and abjection. It is a preoccupation with lack that Jantzen particularly targets in her article. For Daphne Hampson, the idea that one's self must be broken in order to be grounded in one who is not oneself is 'yet another reason not be Christian' (95). So she objects to the tone of subjection that she finds in Susan Parsons' book *The Ethics of Gender*. Coakley, in an interaction with Hampson, addresses from the inside of Christian spiritual practice the kind of submission (she uses this term rather than 'subjection') Christianity demands of its followers (Coakley 1996, 82–111; 2002, 3–39). She believes in power made possible through vulnerability, and transformation made possible through self-emptying (as opposed to self-negation).

The philosophy of religion has been slower than theology and some of her other sister disciplines, notably moral philosophy and philosophy of science, to attract the scrutiny of feminists or to engage with feminist critique. So despite the work that has been done by feminists in

laying bare the inadequacies of the ideal of ascent, many philosophers of religion remain strongly committed to a model of ascent in the form of conceptions of the ideal rational agent. As already noted, many philosophers of religion are committed to idealizations of the rational agent as someone able to achieve a 'God's eye view'.

Presumably the attraction of the God's-eye view lies in its connection to the classical conception of God as disembodied, omnipresent, all-seeing, omniscient and so on. This connection can be seen in the sorts of thought-experiments some philosophers of religion devise. A by now infamous passage from Richard Swinburne invites us to undertake a thought-experiment to see if we can imagine becoming disconnected from our own bodies. The purpose of his experiment is to persuade us of the possibility of a disembodied being, with the infinite qualities traditionally ascribed to God:

Imagine yourself ... gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, your thinking being equally coherent however men mess about with your brain. ... You gradually find yourself aware of what is going on in bodies other than your own ... You also come to see things from any point of view ... You ... find yourself able to move directly anything which you choose ... You also find yourself able to utter words which can be heard anywhere ... Surely anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an omnipotent spirit. So it seems logically possible that there be such a being. (Swinburne 1977, 104–5)

In her monograph in feminist philosophy of religion, *Becoming Divine* (1998), Grace Jantzen vehemently resists Swinburne's idealization of freedom from one's bodily existence:

The passage bristles with problematic assumptions: about the nature of the imagination, the implied identification of God with a disembodied omnipotent spirit, the idea that anyone who can imagine "himself" as an infinitely extended (and disembodied) version of an Oxford professor

is an analogue of the divine. But underlying all of these is the untroubled notion of the rational subject, human and divine, and an implicit investment in the symbolic of death, since it is only when the rational human subject is released from its troublesome body that it will truly be godlike (Jantzen 1998, 28–90).

Jantzen's method involves using psycholinguistic tools to analyze at the level of the symbolic what (or who) constitutes reason and the fulfilment of humanity. She follows Irigaray's psychoanalytical reading of the western tradition in order to recover what has been repressed. She finds an obsession with death, salvation and escape from the flesh, and hence a repression of life and the realities of bodily existence. Her aim is to reorient the whole symbolic away from mortality and towards natality and the flourishing of life. This is why, as Beverley Clack explains in her article here, Jantzen refers to we human beings as 'naturals' rather than 'mortals'.

In her paper for this collection, Jantzen works to reconfigure and reclaim desire. She challenges depictions of desire as death, and reconfigures desire in terms of plenitude and creativity. She draws on the spiritual *Showings* of Julian of Norwich to reveal desire that is not premised on lack but on God's desire for her. God's love and grace are over- flowing, and the divine desire finds its mimesis in Julian's desire for God.

Jantzen points out some of the ways in which she diverges from usual practice in philosophy of religion. Typically, philosophers of religion would query her talk of divine desire and enter into a debate over the impassability, self-sufficiency and perfection of God. Jantzen finds such debates 'flat footed', and a distraction from more important questions about the kind of resources religion can provide for our transformation. Jantzen's proposal, most fully stated in *Becoming Divine* but implicit throughout her paper here, is that feminist philosophy of religion is radically discontinuous with a masculinist tradition. She acknowledges that she does not address any of the usual topics in a philosophy of religion syllabus, and warns philosophers that she is challenging the boundaries

of the discipline. Her principle aim is to recover the symbolically feminine. This means that not everyone will recognize her project as philosophy, but will instead see it as a (perhaps psychoanalytical) surrogate for philosophy (cf. Fricker and Hornsby 2000, 3; Harris 2000; Jantzen 2000). Also, not everyone will accept so essentialist a notion as the symbolically feminine.

Beverley Clack's paper in this issue is a response to Jantzen's broader project, particularly as represented in *Becoming Divine*, and in a special edition of the *Scottish Journal of Philosophy of Religion* that Jantzen edited, entitled *Beginning with Birth*. She argues in effect that Jantzen's focus on natality is repressive. It denies those aspects of human reality, including pain and death, that Jantzen herself finds so repressive of birth and life in the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, Clack's response to Jantzen echoes the question raised by Terry Eagleton and Sarah Coakley as to whether 'the post-modern *intellectual* obsession with "body" as it relates to the theorizing of sexuality and gender [is] an ... evasive ploy'. Is it, Coakley asks, 'fuelling, as well as feeding off, more "popular" manifestations of dearth-denial, and screening us from political and social horrors that we otherwise cannot face?' (Coakley 2002, 156; cf. Eagleton 1996). Clack's paper reveals the extent to which the binary of life and death operates in Jantzen's work, despite Jantzen's critique of binary oppositions.

It is noteworthy that as both Jantzen and Clack struggle to overcome these binaries, neither wishes to draw on the images within the Christian tradition—for which parallels can be found in all religious traditions—of the intimate connection between life and death. Emphases within Christianity include: the pain and risk of death in labour and birth, which bring new life and hope; the necessity of Jesus' death for resurrection and eternal life; and our willingness to die spiritually, or sometimes physically, as bringing life to ourselves and others—'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12, 24). It is not surprising that they omit such references, considering the abuses to which Christian teaching on

the need to lay down one's life can be put, and the toll this has taken on women. Yet it is at the very least a biological reality that death is bound up with new life. This is part of Clack's argument. Therefore, healthy appropriation of those religious resources that recognize the inextricable relation between life and death can help us to live with this reality. It can keep alive the hope that new life comes from death, or that no situation is so bad that life cannot come from it. It is this hope that undergirds the transformative work that Jantzen finds so important about religion. Drawing on such resources might also help philosophers of religion to avoid the death-life binary to which some have become hostage.

Clack discusses miscarriage, rape and ageing, the latter being the focus of Jean Grimshaw's paper. Both Clack and Grimshaw raise the matter of moments when you no longer recognize your body as yourself. These are moments when the insight 'I am my body' is challenged. Clack and Grimshaw confront these times when we feel alienated from our own bodies, or have a sense of ourselves splitting off from our bodies. Neither takes such moments as experiential support for mind-body dualism, but rather as an impetus to explore processes of healing and reintegration.

Grimshaw finds de Beauvoir ultimately unreconciled to her old age, but her careful reading of de Beauvoir's work on ageing reveals precisely its ambivalence rather than its outright pessimism. By contrast, de Beauvoir's biographer Toril Moi, and others who have written on de Beauvoir and ageing (notably Kathleen Woodward and Penelope Deutscher) have dismissed her work on *Old Age* as simply reflecting her depression about her own particular situation<sup>1</sup>. Grimshaw's reading is more attentive and nuanced. Nevertheless, Grimshaw notes that de Beauvoir is gloomy about the diminishing amount of time ahead of her as she gets older. She adopts from de Beauvoir the theme of unrealizability and relates it to contemplation about the future in one who is conscious of ageing and facing the 'unrealizability of any future stage of my life' (82).

The philosophers in this volume steer clear of talk about the next life. They focus intently on our bodilyness and our lived lives, and on this world as the locus of the divine. Preoccupation with an afterlife frequently signals yet again a longing to ascend above earthly reality. This is why Clack criticizes Sonya's 'blinkered response' to the suffering around her in Chekhov's play Uncle Vanya. At the end of the play, Clack writes, Sonya places her hope in a 'hypothetical other-world' as an 'escape mechanism' from the suffering in this world (53, 60).

However, we jettison resources for practical, transformative hope if we do not think and push our imaginations beyond the realities of this life. Belief in a life beyond is often escapist, but is not necessarily so. It frequently inspires hope and hopeful action for the here and now, particularly where the new life is conceived not as a spirit world of floating, disembodied individuals, but as a transformed physical and social reality in which destructive, systemic powers have been replaced by a different, just and equitable order. Herein lies the politically and socially subversive nature of prophetic and apocalyptic writings:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price (Isaiah 55.1).

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them ... Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have

passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Revelation 7.16–17; 21.1–5a).

Such writings encourage an imaginative and hopeful response to dire circumstances, rather than emotional, psychological and social withdrawal. Admittedly, much of the apocalyptic language of the Book of Revelation appears fanatical, which can be off-putting. But the fanaticism reflects extreme feelings of threat, as the New Testament scholar Christopher Rowland points out:

The language of the oppressed, those who, for whatever reason, feel themselves to be on the margins of history, can from the perspective of those who wield power seem hysterical and too apocalyptic in tone. The book of Revelation expresses those feelings of outrage and stark contrast in ways which are, however ... channelled into a creative and non-violent trend of activity in which identification with the role of the Lamb is kept at the centre of things. (Rowland 1993, 139–40)

Apocalyptic is therefore not an escapist response: 'It is ... a political response, though the inspiration for it arises from elsewhere than conventional political wisdom' (Rowland 1993, 140).

Significantly, discussions of the afterlife in standard philosophy of religion texts and syllabi focus on the possibility of an individual's personal continuity after the death of his or her body. Personal survival after death is usually conceived in broadly Platonist terms as a soul getting along without its body in some sort of spirit-world, at least for an interim period. Feminist theologians have recovered from the Christian tradition the emphasis on the bodiliness and sociality of the next life. So whereas the doctrine of the resurrection of the body had all but fallen from view in Christian theology, feminists have resurrected it because without it any vision of the next life is precisely that vision of disembodied souls free of all that is earthly and bodily. Biblical images of

the next life bear no resemblance at all to discussions about floating souls and personal continuity. They are earthly, bodily and social images of a banquet or a city, the new Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth, 'the whole creation ... groaning in labour pains' for the transformation that is to come upon it (Romans 8: 22). They are images that call us to live in the hope of this transformation not by trying to escape the flesh and ascend in contemplation of God, but by living justly and believing that justice will prevail. They inspire hope, sometimes active and sometimes passive depending on the political context of the writings, but always looking towards a time when the hungry will eat and the mourners, who are the ones that weep for all that is not right in the world, will cry no more.

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#### NOTES

1. Our thanks to Oliver Davis for clarification on this matter.

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## A Reconfiguration of Desire: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity

By Grace M. Jantzen

By the grace of God ... I conceived a great desire ... of longing with my will for God. (Julian of Norwich 1978, 179)

My love is as a fever, longing still  
 For that which longer nurseth the disease ...  
 My reason, the physician to my love ...  
 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve  
 Desire is death ...  
 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,  
 And frantic-mad with evermore unrest ...  
 (Shakespeare Sonnet #147)

What is desire? Is desire conceived 'by the grace of God'? Or is desire death, 'frantic-mad' in tormented restlessness? Or is it both? How does a configuration of desire affect the representation of what it is to be a person?—a woman? Feminists have worked hard to reconfigure and reclaim desire. But desire does not stand alone: it is interconnected with other key ingredients of the masculinist cultural symbolic. In this essay I wish to outline a way of reconfiguring desire by drawing on the work of Julian of Norwich and other writers in the Christian mystical tradition that shows it not to be deathly but central to human flourishing. By this appropriation of Julian's teaching I shall illustrate how religion can be a significant resource for feminist philosophical thought. I am inviting feminists who have dismissed religion as patriarchal and unhelpful to think again, and not to assume that religion is antithetical to critical and progressive thinking. But I am also challenging philosophers of religion,

especially those of the Anglo-American analytic persuasion, not to suppose that feminist engagement will permit business as usual. Boundaries, methods, and aims are all redrawn when philosophy of religion is approached from a feminist perspective (Jantzen 1998).

### **Whose Desire?**

'Desire is death'. Shakespeare's expression is extreme, but the constellation of death and desire and its contrast with truth and rationality is a commonplace of the western symbolic. So also is the implicit gender construction: reason, the physician, is male; and the object of desire is presumed female. Many go further than Shakespeare and figure the woman not only as the object but also as the cause of desire, the temptress, and hence the target of blame. Desire is premised upon a lack, a lack configured female and associated with death. There are many variations on this theme: in the seventeenth century, John Donne bemoaned the sexual arousal women caused him, 'since each such act, they say, diminisheth the length of life a day' (Hollander 1973, 543); in Freud, woman-who-lacks-a-penis is associated with castration, which in turn is a sign/threat of death. The theme of desire, lack, death and the female runs with a few exceptions through western culture from Plato to Lacan (Dollimore 1998; Schrift 2000).

The voice of desire in Shakespeare's 'Sonnet' is obviously a male voice; the desire is masculine desire. So also, though much more subtly, is the desire for beauty and goodness of the aspiring philosopher in Plato's *Symposium*: 'the object of his love and of his desire is whatever he isn't, or whatever he hasn't got—that is to say, whatever he is lacking in', he who has turned away from woman and procreancy of the body and joined himself instead to a male friend for 'procreancy of the spirit rather than the flesh' (*Symposium* 200e, 209a). The gender of desire is not often emphasized in the writings of philosophers, but insofar as they take the masculine position as universal and normative, they also take for granted that their (masculine) account of desire is universal.

But what would happen if a woman voiced desire? How might her desire be configured? Women are of course not supposed to desire: good women are configured as the submissive receptacles of male desire, a representation of women which fits neatly with the configuration of desire as lack. Yet there do exist women's voices waiting to be heard, voices which speak of desire but do so in a different register. In the following section I shall listen closely to one of them: the voice of Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English mystic and theologian. I shall explore her configuration of desire, showing that it is based not on lack but on plenitude and delight. Desire here is not linked with death and madness and 'evermore unrest', nor is woman seen as either passive receptacle or treacherous temptress. Instead, desire is linked with natality and flourishing, beauty and creativity; and women and men equally can be full of grace.

I think that it is no coincidence that a major voice offering an alternative configuration of desire is that of a woman. Nevertheless it would be wrong to give an impression of exact gender mapping. Julian's configuration of desire tests on a tradition of Christian spirituality heavily dependent on that of Augustine, as I shall show—though her emphasis often falls differently. Moreover, there have been modern secular male writers—Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze—who reject the idea of desire as premised upon a lack; contrariwise, there are women writers who fall in with the idea. Nevertheless, I believe that the resources for reconfiguration offered in the writings of Julian enable us to see how desire and gender can be thought together in a way that is positive for both women and men, rather than at women's expense.

### **Julian of Norwich: Desire Reduplicated**

The famous *Showings* of Julian of Norwich, the book in which she recounts her experience of God in a period of acute illness, is permeated with desire. The theme of longing runs throughout the book; indeed the actual word 'desire' is among the most prominent in her text. In the early chapters, where she gives some background to her experiences, she em-

phasizes that her youth had been filled with longing. She 'desired three graces by the gift of God', namely, recollection of the Passion of Christ, a bodily illness, and most importantly, three 'wounds': 'contrition, compassion, and longing with the will for God'. The prayers are unusual, as she herself clearly recognized. What is important for this essay is that she makes plain that all are subsumed in the final one, longing with the will for God. This request (but not the others) she continues to make 'urgently' and 'without any condition' (1978, 178–9). There is, here, a doubling of desire. Julian prays for longing for God; her desire is to be given desire; she longs to long. Throughout her text this desire for the reduplication of longing is repeated with gentle insistence, not in the fever or frenzy of Shakespeare's 'Sonnet', but nevertheless forming a steady undercurrent of the work.

Now, there is something very strange going on here if we assume the symbolic of desire as indicating lack. Obviously Julian would not pray urgently for something unless she desired it; yet what she is praying for is the desire itself. So she already has what she asks for; indeed unless she already had it she could not ask for it. How, then, is her prayer, her desire for desire, to be interpreted?

Readers of Julian's *Showings* cannot help but be struck by the spectacular visions she had of the dying Christ. In analytic philosophy of religion, the mystical visions of a range of figures are often lumped together without much reference to historical or textual context and discussed in relation to questions about the evidential value of 'mystical experience' for claims for the existence of God. Moreover, the God whose existence is thus discussed is assumed to be the omni-everything patriarch of 'classical theism' (Swinburne 1979; Davis 1989; Alston 1991; Pike 1992). I do not think feminists should have much patience with these discussions; certainly they are nowhere near Julian's focus. Even the visions themselves were not her primary interest. Important though they were, for her they were a means to an end, and that end was increasing love and desire for God, the desire she desired. Julian is emphatic that I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I

love God better ... for I am sure that there are many who never had revelations or visions ... who love God better than I' (1978, 191).

The visions do not satiate Julian's desire for God. Rather, they serve to answer her prayer for desire: they reduplicate her longing even while also satisfying it. Throughout her text Julian's desire continually increases even while it is being fulfilled. In her account of her second revelation she puts it vividly:

For I saw him and sought him ... And when by his grace we see something of him, then we are moved by the same grace to seek with great desire to see him for our greater joy. So I saw him and sought him, and I had him and lacked him; and this is and should be our ordinary undertaking in this life ... (193).

'When we see him' and therefore our desire is fulfilled, then 'we are moved ... to seek with great desire to see him'. It is the fulfillment of desire that motivates desire.

Now, from a post-Freudian perspective all of this could be read as thinly disguised eroticism, where sexual desire is increased precisely by its satisfaction. It is not enough if God the divine lover gives himself to her once: indeed, one encounter inflames the desire for more. Moreover, Julian does here explicitly use the language of lack; and taking this passage on its own, it would seem to fit snugly into the western trajectory of desire modeled upon sexuality and premised upon a lack: a gentler, less tormented version than we find in Shakespeare's 'Sonnet' but part of the same pattern. I want to argue, however, that this is not the case. Rather, I believe that Julian fundamentally rejects the binary: lack *or* fulfillment, desire *or* satisfaction, just as she can also be shown to reject other binarities such as 'body *or* soul', 'God *or* world', 'Father *or* Mother'. As I shall show, in Julian's text it is not only lack upon which desire is based, but also plenitude: indeed without plenitude the lack does not appear.

### The Reciprocity of Desire

To support these suggestions, an initial step is to investigate the work of longing in Julian's text. The first thing that becomes obvious is that in her view, Julian's longing for God is reciprocated by—indeed is a reflection of—God's longing for her, and for all of humanity. The divine desire, the love that longs for reciprocation, is at the heart of the love of God which Julian experiences: Jesus, she says, stands ‘moaning and mourning’ until we receive divine love, and desire it in our turn. So important is this reciprocity of desire that it could stand as the theme of her whole book: ‘Love was his meaning’, as she sums it up (342). Perhaps nowhere is the theme of divine desire more explicit than in that part of her vision where she sees the drying wind blowing on Jesus as he hung crucified, and the great thirst which this caused him: this thirst she interprets as ‘his longing in love for us’. Nor did this come to an end when at last he died. Rather,

he still has that same thirst and longing which he had upon the Cross, which desire, longing and thirst, as I see it, were in him from without beginning; and he will have this until the time that the last soul which will be saved has come up into his bliss (230–1).

The thirst of Christ is interpreted as an unquenchable desire for human salvation and bliss, a longing rooted in divine love and generosity. Few of us now, whether religious or not, would be comfortable with the conventional religious worldview or the cosmology of heaven and hell that Julian takes for granted, or with what seems to be a valorization of suffering. However, I propose to stick with the discomfort for a bit longer in order to get clearer on Julian's configuration of desire. As I hope will become clear, this configuration is not dependent on the cosmology out of which it arises, and offers a significant alternative to the idea of desire premised on a lack.

The important point here is that in Julian's teaching, human longing for God, the desire for desire, is a *response* to divine longing illustrated in the thirst of Christ. It is not self-generated. As she puts it,

... truly is there in God a quality of thirst and longing; and the power of this longing in Christ enables us to respond to his longing ... And this quality of longing and thirst comes from God's everlasting goodness ... (231).

Human desire for God is a reciprocation and mimesis of divine desire. Mimetic desire, in Julian's terms, has its source in the divine.

The reciprocity of desire is nowhere more clearly presented than in Julian's teaching on prayer, where she says that ‘Our Lord God is following us, helping our desire’ (254). She claims this insight on the basis of her fourteenth revelation, where Christ says to her in very strong terms, ‘I am the ground of your beseeching. First, it is my will that you should have it, and then I make you to wish it, and then I make you to beseech it’ (248). This being the case, it is to be expected that desire—including desire for desire—will continually increase even while it is being fulfilled, as already discussed. But this is not a matter, in Julian, of ‘the more you get, the more you want’ in a Lacanian sense, of ever-shifting desire whose satiation only escalates the lack. Julian puts it much more in terms of growing fulfillment and flourishing. In her words,

And then we can do no more than contemplate him and rejoice, with a great and compelling desire to be wholly united with him, and attend to his motion and rejoice in his love and delight in his goodness ... (255).

At this point, standard moves in the philosophy of religion would be either to analyze Julian's account of her experience and its evidential value for the credibility of theism, as already mentioned, or to begin to ask questions about the consistency of the concept of God or the coherence of the theism that Julian presupposes. Is the idea of divine desire compatible with a doctrine of God's impassibility? If God is in need of nothing, is it coherent to speak of divine desire? But these are not the questions that I want to pursue, or at least not in the terms in which analytic philosophy of religion pursues them. In the first place, I find them philosophically and religiously flat footed, as though what is of deepest significance could be captured in neat little analytical or dog-

matic boxes. Moreover, most feminists, myself included, do not find conventional theology congenial anyway. If we ever held to it (and I did), we have rejected it, for a range of moral, intellectual, and social/political reasons. Even if its consistency and coherence could be shown, so what? But third, and most importantly, these analytical moves distract attention away from what I find to be far more interesting and pertinent questions, in this instance the question of how desire can be reconfigured. Partly because of the sterility of analytic philosophy of religion, and partly because many feminists adopt the secularism of modernity as completely and unthinkingly as our forebears adopted christendom, the resources of religion are often untapped for their fascinating promptings as to how to rethink the discourses and practices of post/modernity. The discourse of desire, important in itself, is I believe (but cannot show in one essay) only one instance of many more of the central and problematic discourses of modernity where the resources of religious texts (perhaps especially texts by women) indicate how we might think otherwise.

### Plenitude and Lack

For Julian the desire for God is the most fundamental of all human desires. If this is mimetic—if the desire of the divine is always already the ground of desire for the divine—then to understand human desire it is necessary to understand divine desire. This opens two possibilities: either human desire is not premised upon a lack, or else even God is characterized by that lack. Yet it would appear that neither of these options would be theologically acceptable to Julian, given that she wished to remain loyal to the teachings of ‘holy Church’. The first alternative seems at odds with the teaching that humans need God, and indeed contrary to the whole doctrine of sin, whereby humankind is perceived as alienated from God and thereby in a state of fundamental lack. The second is firmly contradicted by the medieval doctrine that there is no lack in God: God is all plenitude. But then how can God desire? And in what sense could human desire, mired in sin and lack, be mimetic of divine desire? Was Julian just muddled?—a beautiful mystic, perhaps, but theologically

confused? (She was, after all, ‘only a woman’: how much can we expect?!) (Cf. Vandenbrouke 1968, 425; 363))

I think not. In the first place, the theme and the vocabulary of desire, while central to Julian, is by no means unique to her. On the contrary, it was integral to the tradition of spirituality in christendom from late antiquity onwards, which taught that human longing for God is and can only be a response to God’s prior longing for humanity. A pivotal example for christendom in this regard is Augustine of Hippo. Augustine has been much castigated, rightly, for the ways in which his emphasis on the desire of and for God led him to denigrate other forms of human desire, especially sexual desire. At his influential worst, he separated spiritual desires from physical ones, and fostered a misogynist suspicion of the body that has done incalculable harm as it resonated through the Christian centuries. But there is more to Augustine. In his *Confessions*, from first to last he represents his increasing longing for God in terms of God’s desire for him. He exclaims, addressing God:

You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace (X.27; 1961, 232).

When Julian says that she finds in herself ‘desire, which was that I might see him more and more; understanding and knowing that we shall never have perfect rest until we see him clearly and truly in heaven’ (1978, 261), she is echoing Augustine’s famous words: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts can find no rest until they rest in you’ (I.1; 1961).

Julian and Augustine do indeed acknowledge lack, in fact the urgency of their desire (though not the frenzy) compares to that in Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet’: it would be foolish and pointless for anyone to pretend they were without needs. Julian says so explicitly: ‘I had him and lacked him’. Augustine uses metaphors of extreme need: blindness, deaf-

ness, gasping for breath, hunger and thirst. But the important question is: where do these needs come from? How do they arise? In Julian, as we have seen, desire for God is responsive; the longing to long is already divine grace. Thus it is not the need that initiates the desire. Rather, desire is generated, paradoxically, by its fulfillment. Lack is the premise of desire only in a secondary sense; at bottom desire is premised on plenitude. Only when she already has God can she want God.

In the christendom upon which Julian drew, God lacks nothing. God's desire is construed not as need but as the overflow of divine love and goodness: the theological term is 'grace'. God's longing for humanity is understood not as a manifestation of divine need—God is complete in God's self—but as generosity. It is a longing better characterized in terms of fecundity and overflowing joy and abundance than in terms of lack or scarcity. Creation is the central symbol of such divine fecundity: the Spirit of God brooding over chaos like a hen over her eggs, bringing forth abundance and variety. Thus in Julian's text, immediately after her expression of desire for God and her prayer for the reduplication of that desire, she continues, 'for [God's] goodness fills all creatures and all his blessed works full, and endlessly overflows in them' (1978, 184). God is addressed as the one whose love and desire for humankind is an overflowing of generous plenitude. God is understood as wholly self-sufficient; and God's desire for the world and for humankind is sheer gift of divine abundance.

### **Death and Natality**

Julian is greatly preoccupied with sin in much of her text, precisely because she sees it as separating humankind from God, creating absence and lack. She wonders why 'the beginning of sin was not prevented' (224), and considers sin the 'sharpest scourge' that can strike anyone. Sin, in christendom, is understood at least in part precisely as desire, *evil* desire, desire for what will actually harm ourselves and/or others: thus Shakespeare's tormented 'desire is death'. From this it might be thought that it is sin that generates human need for salvation; sin therefore that

lies at the basis of desire for God. But Julian sees it otherwise. In her view, sin and its distortions of the individual and society are precisely what *block* desire, not what produce it.

One way of blocking desire is of course to deflect its passion into inappropriate and unfulfilling channels: hence again Shakespeare's 'fever, longing still for that which longer nurseth the disease'. But it would be misguided to make such distorted desire the paradigm by which desire itself should be understood. As we have seen, in Julian's terms desire for God—and all good desire—arise not out of sin or need but out of response to divine desire: if lack in itself could never produce desire, sin is even less likely to do so. Had there been no sin, all our desire would be for the good; our desire for God would be based on unimpeded response to divine presence, not on lack or divine absence. A consequence of this view is that our desires need to be healed and trained away from their harmful and alienating distortions; we need a therapy of desire. But that is very different from seeing desire as death, or wishing that it could be eradicated.

Julian presents a striking image which makes her meaning clearer. She writes:

And in this time I saw a body lying on the earth, which appeared oppressive and fearsome and without shape and form, as it were a devouring pit of stinking mud; and suddenly out of this body there sprang a most beautiful creature, a little child, fully shaped and formed, swift and lively and whiter than the lily, which quickly glided up to heaven (306).

In the immediate context, Julian elaborates this in terms of a contrast between a foul body and a beautiful soul. But as I have argued elsewhere (2000, 138–40), contrary to appearances, this is not another example of the body-hating dualism for which christendom is notorious: Julian's overall acceptance and delight in the body and its functions puts her well beyond such dualism. Rather, we have here a recognition (paralleled by Julian's parable of the servant who falls into a ditch and becomes utterly befouled while attempting to do his lord's bidding) that the filth and

grime are only 'skin deep': they can be washed away. The contrast is that between a clay doll, which no matter how much it is cleaned still remains clay until it is washed away without remainder, and a lovely child who has fallen into the mud and needs a thorough cleaning to be restored to beauty, but it is not mud through and through. In this image I believe Julian's anthropology is encapsulated, and with it her account of sin and desire.

Now, what becomes clear is that an account such as Julian's offers possibilities for a reconfiguration of desire that is not dependent upon the conventional christendom in which Julian couches it. To draw the contrast, we might think, for instance, of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Here we find that desire is paradigmatically deathly: as Freud presents it in the (highly gendered) account of the '*Fort-Da*' game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud [1920] 1984), desire seeks repetition, but repetition always looks to stasis and is ultimately connected with the death drive. Or in more Lacanian terms, desire is founded on the loss of the (m)other and the fragmented 'self' that tries to hold itself together by aggressivity and violence, while all the while, the (m)other for which the self yearns (and by which it is threatened) is configured as lack and linked with death. Desire *itself*—not just distorted or alienated desire—is deathly (cf. Lacan 1977, 8–29; Rose 1993).

But I want to challenge that view. The theme of death and mortality, no less than the theme of desire as premised upon a lack (and linked with it), runs through the western cultural symbolic as an existential and philosophical category, to the virtual exclusion of what is surely at least as important: that we are natals. It is as necessary for us to ponder the implications of the fact that we were born as it is to ponder the fact that we will die. Our natality signals that we are creatures with beginnings, and indicates the possibility of newness, creativity: I shall return to this below. It signals also the inescapability of our gendered bodiliness: everyone who is born is born of a woman's body and is in turn a gendered body, not a sexless soul. Moreover, by the fact of our natality we are connected with other bodies, first with our mother and ultimately

with the whole web of life on earth. We are not atomistic individuals, sprung like mushrooms out of the ground as Hobbes once fantasized: without a supportive interconnected network we would not have survived. The fact of our natality thus has ethical and political consequences as surely as does the fact that we will die. For every Plato who ponders death as the release of the soul from the prison-house of the body, and for every Heidegger who sees confrontation with mortality as freeing us for authenticity, there is a gap in the tradition for a philosopher who ponders our gendered, interconnected embodiment and all its creative potential.

I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (1998, Chapter 7). What I want to highlight here is the importance of natality for the representation of desire. What if we were to take a leaf from Julian's book, and reject the idea that we are mud through and through, pondering instead the beautiful child? I suggest that such consideration of natality leads to rethinking the characterization of desire as metonymous death.

To begin with the process of birth itself: in psychoanalytic literature, the birth of an infant is treated as *expulsion* from the womb, as faeces are expelled in defecation, or as Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden in punishment for sin. The impetus comes from the mother, who gets rid of the foetus. But surely we should stop and think about this model of expulsion. It is certainly true that during the period of labour, especially in its late stages, 'expulsion' is exactly what the woman wants: to that extent the model is accurate. But that is where its accuracy ends. A baby is not a piece of shit, nor is it being punished for wrong-doing. Rather, it is welcomed as new life. And is the infant reluctant to be born? Does it want to stay in the womb? Whatever the answer (and it is not obvious how an answer could be established) it is certainly the case that from the time a baby is born it responds with increasing eagerness to stimulation from the world around it, grasping for new experiences, desiring life and responding to all its wonder. Desire, surely, is here premised on possibility and the active grasp of the newness and creative impulse inherent in natality. My point is not to deny the reality

of the death drive, let alone the struggle and cost involved for an infant in the will to life, even in highly privileged material and social circumstances. But to characterize the infant as *only* passive or reluctant, or to make the death drive the paradigm of *all* desire, seems to me wrong. It is rather like assimilating a beautiful child who has fallen in the mud with a clay figure, which may be prettily dressed but actually is mud all the way through.

### Creativity

The theme of enthusiasm for life which emerges when we take natality as seriously as mortality thus invites a different configuration of desire than that which is central to psychoanalytic theory, or indeed to much of the trajectory of western philosophical thought. I wish now to go further, and consider what this active desire comes to, and in what terms its activity can be understood.

In the writings of Julian, and the Augustinian tradition of which she is a part, divine plenitude is closely linked with creativity. Thus in a famous passage of the *Confessions*, Augustine asks repeatedly, 'What do I love when I love my God?' What is it that draws this responsive desire from me? He questions a range of physical things: the sea and its creatures, the winds and sky and stars, the earth and its wonders, and asks of each one: 'But what is my God?' In turn they reply, 'We are not your God'. Augustine persists, and at last his answer comes: 'Clear and loud they answered, "God is he who made us". I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was all the answer they gave' (X.6; 1961, 212).

I shall return below to the centrality of beauty for active desire. Here I wish first to consider what is involved in creativity. In Augustine and Julian, and the tradition of spirituality of which they form a part, creation and re-creation is fundamental to the configuration of desire, both divine and human. As already mentioned, God's good abundance is expressed in the created world; and human desire for God is a response based on our status as created beings, made in such a way that respon-

sive desire is part of our nature. As Julian has it, 'our natural will is to have God, and God's good will is to have us' (1978, 185). And Augustine, placing similar weight on responsive desire, further emphasizes that divine creativity does not rely for resources on anything that exists already. He says,

But by what means did you make heaven and earth? What tool did you use for this vast work? You did not work as a human craftsman does, making one thing out of something else as his mind directs . . . Nor did you have in your hand any matter from which you could make heaven and earth, for where could you have obtained matter which you had not yet created, in order to use it as material for making something else? Does anything exist by any other cause than that you exist? (XI.5; 1961, 257)

In Augustine and in Christian theology following his thought, this is an expression of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. More properly, it is creation out of the plenitude of the creator. It is not that there is something called 'nothing' out of which God creates, but rather that the resources for creation are not external to God but are part of the divine fullness.

Although Augustine is here contrasting divine with human creativity, the contrast actually only works on the basis of a presumed underlying parallel: both the divine creator and human creators are makers of the new. To be creative is to be innovative. It is not simply to repeat what already exists. Creativity is thus related to natality, the birth of something that has not existed before. The contrast between divine and human creation is not that only God can make the new, but that only God can make the new out of materials that did not already exist. Unlike God, human creators use existing materials, and are influenced by what has gone before. Nonetheless creation is not repetition; it is the emergence of the new.

Now, few of us would accept the Bible story of creation, or even Augustine's sophisticated rendition of it, as a factual account of the ori-

gin of the universe. Nevertheless, I suggest that these theological articulations of creativity repay reconsideration in relation to natality and desire. What motivates human creators, and from where do they get their resources? Good biographies of artistic creators try to discover the influences on their lives and art: their childhood background and traumas, previous works in their field, their cultural and personal history and its painful and resourceful stimulation. All of these are of course illuminating for an understanding of their work. Yet in case after case their biographers recognize in these giants of human creativity an overwhelming desire, almost a compulsion to create, in the most adverse circumstances imaginable, of poverty, isolation or illness. They paint and write and compose out of the fullness of their hearts and minds, out of their plenitude. Their urgent desire is to create, to make the new. Moreover, it is not to create in the abstract, but to paint *this* picture, compose *this* symphony, influenced by the past but also unlike anything there has been before. Is their desire best characterized as premised upon a lack?

I suggest that it is not. Although it is always possible to find in the biography and psychology of creative women and men lacks which have deeply affected their creativity for good or ill, their creative work, their making of newness and their desire to create cannot be *reduced* to lack. It is rather out of the fullness of their hearts and minds—a fullness often developed by long years of hard work and practice—that they find both the resources and the desire to create. Human creativity arises (as does divine creativity in Augustinian theology) out of overflowing plenitude, a plenitude which cannot be denied its creative desire and whose greatest fulfillment is the making of something new. There is no need to romanticize this: there is much hard work as well. Moreover, motivation is always complex. But that very complexity is undervalued if plenitude is ignored and desire is linked exclusively with lack and death.

## Beauty

The configuration of desire developed up to this point in this paper, from a rereading of Julian of Norwich and the tradition of Christian spirituality in which she stands, has shown that not only divine desire but human desire too can be the out-flowing of inner resources: the theological model is helpful not as a literalistic account of divine desire but as a different approach to human longing. But then how is desire mimetic? Is there a way of interpreting this mimesis which goes beyond the theological pieties out of which it emerges?

Another way of asking these questions is to probe creativity more deeply. If creativity—of art or music or thought or human relationship—arises out of fullness rather than emptiness, where does that plenitude come from? What are the resources for the fullness that eventually overflows in the making of the new? It may not be the case that ‘desire is death’; indeed I am arguing that desire may be rooted in natality. But where desire is in fact premised on a lack, and coupled with fear, greed and insecurity, it is assuredly death-dealing: we need to ask not only about the subjects of desire but also about its victims. Who pays the price for the satisfaction of western desires? When we turn the question around like that, it becomes urgent to find ways of entertaining desires that bring creativity and flourishing rather than destruction. It is also obvious that desire has been thought in the west to be the prerogative of privileged men; and that women, colonized peoples, and the earth itself have too often paid the price of those desires. Indeed, the configuration of desire as death—the death and loss of the (male) subject of desire—can be seen for what it is: a classic case of guilty projection, in which the perpetrators of death configure themselves as its victims.

Neither feminists nor philosophers of religion have shown much interest in examining the sources of human creativity. When the topic has been discussed in modernity it has usually fallen under the rubric of aesthetic theory, which has focused on such terms as ‘genius’ or ‘hero of the imagination’. Of whatever dubious use such terms may be, they do not provide much insight into the question of the source of plenitude for

creativity. To be more accurate, they shut down such questions by suggesting that the plenitude is innate or just given, a rare but natural quality which we must respect or even treat with awe. But might we not rather explain creativity and foster its resources in a way that would enhance its availability for the transformation of post/modern culture, fixated as it is on lack, competition and violence?

I suggest that once again suggestions emerge from religious writers like Julian and Augustine who configure desire differently and who place plenitude and creativity at its centre. What do they see as the source of creativity? What exactly is it that evokes their response? In Julian of Norwich, beauty (or 'loveliness' as she often has it) is central to responsive desire. Though she does not select beauty as a separate theme for discussion, it forms a steady undercurrent in her book. Perhaps the best known illustration is that part of the vision in which she is given the whole universe like a hazelnut to hold in the palm of her hand. She is amazed at its fragile beauty, concerned about how it can last; and she is given the assurance of God's tender care for it (1978, 183). In her visions of Jesus on the cross, she makes much of the beauty of his face, 'the fairest of heaven, the flower of earth' (194), and sees it as a revelation of divine beauty, marred and discoloured by the sufferings of the crucifixion. She responds to the loveliness of his face—'lovely' both in the sense of 'loving' and in the sense of 'beautiful'. Indeed, it is precisely this loveliness that evokes the reduplication of her desire. The divine plenitude that calls for her mimetic desire is experienced by Julian as loveliness.

The privileging of beauty in Julian's writings echoes that in the Augustinian tradition of spirituality in which she stands. I have already quoted Augustine's account of the answer of the earth and sky and stars to his question about their creator: 'Clear and loud they answered, "God is he who made us". I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their *beauty* was all the answer they gave' (X.6; 1961, 212; emphasis mine). For Augustine, the overflowing creative plenitude of the divine is expressly characterized as beauty; and it is this beauty which evokes his response. Time and again he returns to the theme.

But what do I love when I love my God? Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace . . . And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace ... (X.6; 211).

These words have often been read as denoting a sharp division between the physical and the spiritual, with the admonition that physical things of beauty are to be rejected for some spiritualized or other-worldly beauty. There is much in Augustine that lends itself to such a dualistic interpretation and its fateful and misogynist consequences for western culture. But I believe that a more generous reading is also called for, one which recognizes how Augustine is struggling to come to terms with the heartfelt intensity of his own response to beauty. As he says in a later passage,

The eyes delight in beautiful shapes of different sorts and bright and attractive colours. I would not have these things take possession of my soul. Let God possess it, he who made them all. . . Yet those who have learnt to praise you for this as well as for your other gifts, O God, Maker of all things, sing you a hymn of praise for it (X.34; 239–40).

The beauties Augustine finds in the world around him, in music, and even in erotic attraction, are not themselves gods. Therefore to stop at them would be to stop short, to make them into idols. Nevertheless, they are beautiful, and their beauty is a reflection of divine beauty. Augustine's rejection of their divinity is not a rejection of their beauty: rather he responds to them, and through them to God their maker. Their beauty tells him about the divine beauty. As he says later on, 'It was you, then, O Lord, who made them, you who are beautiful, for they too are beautiful . . .' (XI.4; 256). And from the depths of his being he cries out, 'Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you' (X.27).

Moreover, Augustine is clear that human creativity is mimetic desire, response to the beauty of divine creation. The makers of the new are able to be creative because of this divine plenitude with which they are filled. He says,

the beauty which flows through men's minds into their skillful hands comes from that Beauty which is above their souls and for which my soul sighs all day and night. And it is from this same supreme Beauty that men who make things of beauty and love it in its outward forms derive the principle by which they judge it ... (X.34; 240).

The resources that enable creativity, the desire to make something new out of overflowing inner plenitude, are nurtured by beauty; it is as a response to beauty that creativity can be set free.

Perhaps the reason that desire has been so persistently configured as a lack in the western symbolic is that that symbolic has been preoccupied with Truth (and with Good) and has very largely ignored Beauty and its resources. But the writers of the spiritual tradition in christendom have much to say that cuts the other way. In their view, it is the beauty of holiness that evokes a response of desire and yearning at its attractiveness. It thereby helps to form the character of the one who responds to it, drawing them also to be makers of the new, whether in artifact or in the shape of their lives and actions.

There is of course also much in christendom, even in the writers I have cited, that is contrary to this theme of delighted and creative human response to beauty. There is a rejection of the material world, a disengagement of its pleasures, a fear of its delights. The beauty of the human body, of sexuality, particularly of women, is often represented as temptation or evil rather than as the outpouring of divine desire. There is also the use of beauty for display and ostentation: the magnificence of medieval cathedrals and their contents, for example, can be read as expressions of piety and mimetic creativity, but also as technologies of power. And always there is the question: what counts as beauty; and who is doing the counting?

All of that being granted, it remains the case that there is in this emphasis on beauty that we find in the writers of Christian spirituality something crucial to a reconfiguration of desire. It is the insistence that beauty evokes longing; desire is ignited by loveliness, and responds creatively. It is engaged with natality, the making of the new, not out of preoccupation with death but as a mimetic response to overflowing resources. This is a responsive desire, not self-generated; but it is desire premised on plenitude rather than on a lack, on overflowing generosity rather than scarcity, on creativity rather than on exclusionary violence and death. Indeed, it is through such engagement with beauty and natality that lack and death themselves can be better understood, so that they stand not as binary opposites to plenitude and life but as elements within them, never denied or without value, but taking their appropriate, secondary, place.

My argument is *not* that the cosmology or the doctrines of early christendom are necessary for this reconfiguration of desire; quite the reverse. In fact, even in the ordinary experiences of our lives we can observe the relationship between beauty, creative plenitude, and mimetic desire. The sight of the clouds hanging in a mountain valley or a tree turning to burnished red makes us wish we could paint, or take a good photograph, or at least send a postcard, partly to preserve it in memory and partly to share it with others who would have a similar creative response: 'I wish you were here; you'd love this'. The makers of the new in art and music and writing nourish themselves with beauty and in their turn overflow with creative desire (Scarry 1999, 6).

But although the reconfiguration of desire is not logically dependent upon christendom, nevertheless the resources of its spirituality can serve as a reminder of a counter-vailing strand in the western symbolic to the more usual theme that desire is death. In thinkers like Julian of Norwich and Augustine we can discern ways of thinking otherwise, recognizing desire as an aspect of our natality and mimetic creativity. I would not wish to be understood as advocating a business-as-usual approach to theological orthodoxy, and I hope I have made plain my re-

jection of the usual boundaries of the philosophy of religion. However, I contend that if feminists adopt an unquestioning secularism which rejects as valueless the resources of spirituality, we lose more than we gain. It is necessary, as Luce Irigaray has said, to 'rethink religion'—and, I suggest, to rethink secularism too, in order not to acquiesce in the symbolic of lack and death in which post/modern desire is invested. That such a reconfiguration of desire will also require a revolution in psychoanalytic theory, not to mention a restructuring of social and political thought and practice, can hardly be denied. What is at issue is nothing less than a transformation of the world from a self-perpetuating fixation on death to an opening of natality. But then, transformation is what feminism—and religion—are all about.

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## Embodiment and Feminist Philosophy of Religion

By Beverley Clack

In her critique of Plato's worldview, Luce Irigaray criticizes the pessimism that characterizes his response to the physical world. Plato, famously, offers a dualistic account of reality where this physical world is but a pale imitation of the 'real' World of Forms or Ideas. The role of the philosopher is to detach 'himself' (and 'his' pupils) from this mutable world, focusing his attention upon the eternal truths of the world of ideas. Irigaray, in criticizing this position, expresses her incredulity that the Platonic emphasis on a hypothetical other-world could ever have gained hold on the western imagination. As she puts it: 'what could induce anyone to choose as the more visible, the more true, and ultimately the more valuable something that is merely named and that is intended to replace something else that has charmed your whole life?' (Irigaray [1974] 1985, 271). The 'something ... that has charmed your whole life' is clearly this physical world, and Irigaray's work suggests that the Platonic approach to physical existence is based upon a perverse rejection of the joys of this world. Her approach is thus characterized by an optimistic account of physical existence: if only we could rid ourselves of masculinist theorizing, she seems to be saying, we would be able to reconnect with the wonder of being embodied human beings.

An alternative to this fundamentally positive account of physical existence is to be found in Voltaire's novel *Candide*. Here, Cunegonde's serving woman, after recounting her experiences of suffering, loss and tragedy, makes the following comment:

I have wanted to kill myself a hundred times, but somehow I am still in love with life. This ridiculous weakness is perhaps one of our most melancholy propensities; for is there

anything more stupid than to be eager to go on carrying a burden which one would gladly throw away, to loathe one's very being and yet to hold fast, to fondle the snake that devours us until it has eaten our hearts away? (Voltaire [1758] 1947, 57)

Suffering, grief, decrepitude and ultimately death constitute the pattern for all human life. If this pessimistic view is accepted, it would seem absurd to cling to an existence which brings such misery; yet Voltaire's point is that this is precisely what most of us do.

My aim in this paper is not to support unreservedly either position. Instead, I want to resist the either/or mentality that characterizes both positions: either human life is glorious, or it is wretched. My intention is to offer a position that suggests something of the complexity of human life: a complexity that requires us to take seriously the range of experiences open to human beings. In order to do this, I shall challenge the overwhelmingly positive account of embodied existence offered by some feminist philosophers of religion.<sup>1</sup> While sharing the intention to engage more positively with the physical world than has perhaps traditionally been the case, my concern is that in attempting to redress the balance, the negative consequences of human embodiment have been overlooked.<sup>2</sup> When such experiences are neglected, this new perspective can be as potentially distorting as that which is being rejected.<sup>3</sup> My hope is that by considering negative experiences of embodiment alongside more positive accounts of the body we might arrive at an account of human life that holds together joy and sorrow, birth and death. By accepting the very ambivalence of human life, it is possible to arrive at a more rounded account of embodiment that does justice to the full range of human experience.

### Embodiment in Feminist Philosophy of Religion

The recent moves to formulate a feminist philosophy of religion have invariably offered an optimistic view of physical existence. We have already seen something of Irigaray's attempt to do this. A similar trend can

be identified in Grace Jantzen's highly influential and important work, *Becoming Divine* (1998). Jantzen argues that mortality has been the key philosophical category for exploring meaning in the west. This has had a particular impact upon the way in which religion is constructed. In defining human beings as 'mortals', the discussion of religion revolves around this central claim that humans are destined to die. This does not simply influence the role that immortality will play in religious formulations; it also leads to the idea that knowledge lies outside this physical world, that we are minds whose relationship to the body is purely tangential, and so on. The significance of the physical world is downplayed, or even rejected. Jantzen's solution to this state of affairs is to reject the paradigm of mortality in favour of an emphasis on natality. Defining human beings as 'naturals', rather than mortals, shifts the emphasis from the end of life to its beginnings. Hope, new life, and flourishing are the categories she wishes to explore, and this leads to a joyful acceptance of human embodiment.

At the heart of Jantzen's work is the attempt to reclaim the significance of ordinary, physical, human existence. This move is plainly intended as a corrective to the tendency of the western tradition to place the meaning of human life outside this world. The effects of Platonic dualism have already been detailed: consideration might also be given to Aristotle's claim that the ability to transcend one's physical placing through the rational processes of the mind is the defining mark of our humanity; or the way in which Descartes formulates the essential self as the mind which can exist separately from the human body. In each of these accounts, humanity is defined according to those features that seem to transcend the physical. There are clearly good reasons for resisting the negative view of embodied existence implicit in such accounts, where the meaning of human life lies not in itself but in something that transcends it. Jantzen, in common with many feminist theologians,<sup>4</sup> wishes to challenge such moves, seeing the physical world as the locus for the divine. Ordinary human life is seen as sacred. In some ways, her claim that the goal of the religious life is to 'become

divine' mirrors the claims of theologians like Carol Christ: namely, that the divine is located in this world, in nature, others, and ourselves (cf. Christ [1979] 1992).

There is something very powerful in such reformulations of divinity, not least because the intention behind them is to reclaim the female body as a potential site for the divine: quite revolutionary when we think of the extent to which the concept of God has been modelled on the male body. Yet the move to reclaim the female body (and, by implication, human physicality) has been coupled with a tendency to focus primarily on those experiences that suggest a joyful rendition of the body. Such experiences—notably birth—have been used as a way of resisting the 'necrophilic' (or death-loving) tendency of the western tradition (cf. Jantzen 1998, 129–41).

This brings us to the crux of the matter. Like Jantzen, I wish to reject that dualism which alienates us from this our home. Like her, I accept that we are our bodies. But at the same time I want to develop a more detailed critique of the impetus for the dualistic construction of selfhood. Under my reading, this dualism becomes less a manifestation of a masculinist tradition obsessed with death, and more an understandable response to the sometimes tragic experience of being a human animal. In this sense, I am following the trend identified by Edward and Kate Fullbrook in Simone de Beauvoir's work (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998). According to their reading of de Beauvoir, she argues that we are embodied beings, '*like it or not*' (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998, 60). But to add that rider—'*like it or not*'—suggests that de Beauvoir is far from offering an uncritical optimism about the nature of embodied beings. Joy and sorrow, health and sickness, life and death are all part of the complex nature of the human condition.

Indeed, in reflecting upon the complexity of being human it may be helpful to return to the claim that we should see the world and our lives as *in some sense sacred*. The sacred cannot simply be identified with life and joy, but also includes the experiences of awe and terror (cf. R. Otto [1917] 1923), experiences which suggest that we are tiny, insignificant

parts of the greater cosmic whole. In revisiting and reclaiming human physicality, an honest appraisal must be made of the experiences of suffering, disease and death.

Too often, feminist reformulations ignore the meaning of such features for our understanding of human life. In Jantzen's case, this appears to arise as a direct consequence of the methodology that she places at the centre of her work (cf. Jantzen 1998, 59–99). Jantzen argues that deconstructing the tradition involves three key stages: firstly, we identify what philosophical emphasis upon death and reason has repressed—i.e. birth and desire. Secondly, we emphasize these repressed elements: hence the construction of natality as a paradigm for understanding our humanity. Finally, we are in a position to move between these two positions—natality and mortality—thus creating new accounts of meaning and value.

My concern is that, in practice, Jantzen's methodology does not easily facilitate that third, integrative movement. Rather, the philosophical and methodological dualism of the western tradition is simply replaced by a new dualism that quickly becomes the new orthodoxy. The tendency of the tradition to divide reality into binary opposites may be challenged, but ultimately the neglected side of these oppositions is simply valued more highly than its counterpart when it comes to categorizing human life. Thus birth is valued above death, body above mind, and intuition above reason.

There are plainly good reasons for this move; an imbalance in the way in which the tradition has conceived humanity is being corrected. The emphasis on death and the mental has skewed our understanding of what it is to be a human being. *But*, if we are really to come to terms with the complexity of human life, we must go beyond offering a simple corrective; and I see little evidence that this final stage in the process is being attempted. Perhaps this is because Jantzen's methodology is a highly abstract way of proceeding which fails to start from our lived experience. If we are to achieve a genuine balance in our discussions

about humanity, we cannot afford not to contemplate the full range of human experience, even when those experiences are painful.

### **The Estranged Body**

In this section I want to explore what happens when a person becomes estranged from the body. When, if you like, there ceases to be an easy correlation between 'me' and the primary way of identifying myself, my body. Feminism has rightly insisted on using concrete examples rather than simple abstraction, and so I shall be using examples drawn mainly from literature but also from art to illustrate some of the problems associated with embodied existence. Such examples challenge a too-easy acceptance of embodiment as an unmitigated good. At the same time, these examples require a more complex response to the meaning of being human, one which moves beyond either optimistic or pessimistic accounts of human embodiment.

### ***The Suffering Body***

In developing her account of natality, Jantzen employs a dual strategy. On the one hand, she emphasizes the phenomenon of birth as exemplifying the joy and hope of human existence; on the other, she resists dualistic accounts of human being by employing a developmental model of personhood drawn from the insights of psychoanalysis (cf. Jantzen 1998, 28–43). Jantzen is at pains to resist any claim that she might be offering an essentialist account that identifies women with the process of motherhood: her focus is on the fact that each one of us is a natal, born into human community. In this sense, her intention is to highlight the values which can be derived from the fact that we are creatures who are born, rather than simply to foreground the actual experience of birthing or the woman's role in this process.

While there are evidently good reasons for avoiding a discussion of the actual experience of birth, it is difficult not to slip between natality as a concept and the lived experience of birthing. However, by

attempting to avoid such slippage, Jantzen effectively ignores some of the more disturbing aspects of the reproductive process. The claim that natality can be defined in opposition to mortality ignores the extent to which life and death can be intimately connected in the birthing process. The painting 'Henry Ford Hospital or the Flying Bed' by Frida Kahlo (1907–54) is a powerful response to her experiences of miscarriage and her inability to carry a child to full term. A woman lies on a hospital bed, bleeding, a single tear falling on her cheek. Emerging from her body, attached by what appear to be umbilical cords, are a variety of objects, some of which are more obviously identifiable than others: a foetus, a flower, a metallic object. What is graphically conveyed is the sense of loss, pain and suffering which she associates with the birthing bed. Her sorrow, as well as her sense of her body as something that has failed her, challenges any purely positive values to be derived from the birthing process. A move from reflection on death to a discussion of birth cannot avoid an engagement with such negative experiences of embodiment: Kahlo's work clearly shows that the hope of pregnancy does not always lead to the joy of birth.

The neglect of such experiences of suffering highlights a potential weakness in feminist philosophy of religion to date. Sharon Welch and others have rightly drawn attention to 'structural evils' and the need to respond to the injustices of racism, sexism and classism (Welch 1990). Such an expansion of the way in which evil is discussed within the academy should be welcomed: yet the neglect of the suffering caused by what would traditionally be called 'physical evil' somewhat undercuts the good work done in expanding the remit of such discussions. Human beings not only suffer at the hands of human structures: natural processes can also bring suffering, as attested to so powerfully in Kahlo's painting. We need to take seriously such experiences, for they suggest a rather different picture of human life than that derived only from a contemplation of beauty, joy, and new life.

The inability to deal with the dark underbelly of human life can lead to the kind of insensitivity that has all-too-often plagued traditional

theodicies. Having engaged with Kahlo's powerful rendition of her own sorrow, consider some passages from Adriana Cavarero (1995). Cavarero, upon whose work Jantzen bases her own account of natality, is similarly at pains to avoid linking natality with maternity. Indeed, she goes further, arguing that infertile women should avoid artificial fertility treatments. Such treatments arise, she claims, from an 'obsessive desire' to be a mother which ignores the fact that there is more to being female than producing offspring:

This desire of a woman to be a mother crucially reveals the totalising coincidence of feminine identity with its maternal role, so that if a woman cannot be a mother something essential is denied: her value, function, role. (Cavarero 1995, 89)

Some important and valid ideas are being expressed here: Cavarero is right in identifying the dangers inherent in an account of womanhood that links it primarily to mothering. But at the same time, Cavarero tends to overlook the very real heartache that can arise from the inability to have children. This is not to say that one cannot move on and put in place different strategies for coping with infertility; my concern is that the pain involved should be taken seriously when considering what an emphasis on natality may mean for our formulations of being human. Indeed, Cavarero goes on to say that 'if perchance this desire [for motherhood] is eventually thwarted, the frustration can be borne with *quiet regret*' (Cavarero 1995, 90; my emphasis). The tone of this passage puts one in mind of the speech made by Sonya at the end of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* ([1896] 1987). At the end of a play where the hopes of the chief protagonists have been obliterated, Sonya recommends resignation to the ills of human life. A higher harmony achieved after death provides the basis for her hope in this life (Chekhov [1896] 1987, 58–59). While Cavarero does not place her hope in some hypothetical other-world, a similarly blinkered response to the realities of human suffering pervades her writing at this point. At the very least, human suffering must challenge the kind of worldviews we formulate,

and my concern is that Cavarero's somewhat cavalier attitude to infertility fails to recognize what such experiences suggest about the ambivalence of human life. Life and death, joy and sorrow, gain and loss can all meet around the birthing bed, and if this connection is recognized, any attempt to discuss natality in opposition to mortality must be rejected.

Alongside her rejection of dualistic accounts of human being, Jantzen uses her conception of natality to advocate a developmental and relational construction of the self. The fragmenting of the self into mind and body is rejected as an example of the masculinist desire to transcend the problematic physical. Jantzen makes an important point when she argues for recognition of the forgotten role played by desire in formulating the key categories of the western tradition (Jantzen 1998, 23–4). Yet the kind of dualism advanced by Plato and others cannot be simply connected with masculinist fears. There may be more complex reasons for the attraction of a philosophy that distances the essential self from the body, and a further engagement with the suffering body may help locate the origins of this desire.

Kathy Page, in her account of the aftermath of rape, suggests that self-protection may explain the desire to distinguish between the mental and the physical. Page's novel, *Back in the First Person* (1986), begins with a strong sense of the body as constitutive for the self: her protagonist, Cath, comments that her body's aversion to her partner Steve suggests that her body knew before her mind that their relationship was over (Page 1986, 14). Such embodied knowing is shattered when Steve rapes her. Her body ceases to be identifiable with herself. Sitting in the bath she realizes that '[she] could not look at [her] body or touch it' (26). This splitting in the sense of self is mirrored by a narrative device: the book which started in the first person moves to the third person, emphasizing Cath's own distance from her abused body (27).

What sense are we to make of this move? Lucy Tatman has argued that such a dualistic split between mind and body makes sense as a survival strategy in certain extreme situations (Tatman 1998), an

interpretation which coheres with Cath's experience. In a situation where the initial rape is underscored by a painful medical examination (Page 1986, 37–9), and an invasive cross-examination in court, locating herself in her inner life and thoughts provides a way of coping with the continued assault upon her body. This strategy works for a time, and again suggests that Tatman is correct when she sees such strategies as arising *in extremis*. Indeed, Page suggests that maintaining this degree of distance from the body should only be understood as an interim measure (Page 1986, 129). In the end, if Cath is to move on she must return to a unified sense of herself. She achieves this through a deepening friendship with Sal (173–77), but also through a renewed sense of her connection with the rest of the world. Initially, this reconnection takes the form of an apple (191), which, through its taste, smell and appearance, acts as a reminder of the beauty possible in the world. Eventually, Cath is able to experience her body once more as a site of pleasure (243), and this experience further facilitates her return to the first person (220; 234).

The examples drawn from Kahlo's and Page's work suggest that a simple shift from mortality to natality may not be enough to enable a complex engagement with the realities of human embodiment. Birth may involve sorrow and death; and a dualistic sense of the self may provide an effective survival strategy in a situation where the body seems to be an enemy, not a friend.

#### *The Ageing Body*

The distance between one's sense of self and the mutable body, catalogued by Page, arises again when the ageing process is addressed—or at least, for the purposes of this paper, the ageing process as detailed by the novelists Mary Wesley and Margaret Atwood. What does it mean to say that 'I am my body' when that body fails to correspond with the image one has of oneself?

In *Jumping the Queue* (1984), Mary Wesley's heroine Matilda is a middle-aged woman who, faced with the prospect of a lonely old age, has decided to commit suicide. Before she can do this, however, Hugh

comes into her life. Hugh is a fugitive, hunted by the police who have charged him with the murder of his mother. The two strike up an unlikely friendship. At one point, whilst discussing the death of Hugh's mother, Matilda argues that he has done his mother a favour:

"She didn't want old age, arthritis, falling down, losing her teeth, her balance, her hair, her memory, her wits. She didn't want dependence on other people, becoming a bore, growing incontinent"

... "She was very spry for her age, not at all incontinent."

"So am I for mine, but I'm not waiting for all that: it's against my principles; creaking joints, fatigue, clicking teeth, brown spots, wrinkled bottom." (Wesley 1984, 47)

Of course, it could be argued that the problem lies with Matilda's perception of herself, rather than with a state of affairs she does or could experience. When the reader sees her through Hugh's eyes, his account suggests a more pleasing picture than the one that she presents (Wesley 1984, 62; 181). Matilda could be viewed as simply internalizing society's own account of the problematic nature of the ageing female body. There does not seem much of a place for such a body in a society which both objectifies the young female body and seems obsessed with maintaining eternal youth. Yet Wesley's description seems less concerned with the loss of an ephemeral youthful beauty. If anything, Matilda's fears revolve around the loss of her *self* as the body inevitably becomes a prey to disease, decay and death. The symptoms associated with mortality underpin her concern with the ageing of her body, and this response suggests that women are not immune from the supposedly patriarchal concerns with ageing and death.

Margaret Atwood presents an apparently more straightforward account in *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Atwood's central character, Iris, is clearly an elderly woman rather than a middle-aged woman grappling with the fear of ageing—although it could be argued that Atwood, her-

self a middle-aged woman, is merely projecting her own fears of what ageing involves onto this character. Either interpretation proves my point: ageing is not simply the concern of masculinism! At one point in the novel, Iris has slipped on the ice and is confined to her home. This is how she describes the experience:

Now I'm grounded. Also enraged at myself. Or not at myself—at this bad turn my body has done me. After having imposed itself on us like the egomaniac it is, clamouring about its own needs, foisting upon us its own sordid and perilous desires, the body's final trick is simply to absent itself. Just when you need it, just when you could use an arm or a leg, suddenly the body has other things to do. It falters, it buckles under you; it melts away as if made of snow, leaving nothing much. Two lumps of coal, an old hat, a grin made of pebbles. The bones dry sticks, easily broken.

It's an affront, all of that. Weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities—they aren't ours, we never wanted or claimed them. Inside our heads we carry ourselves perfected—ourselves at the best age, and in the best light as well: never caught awkwardly, one leg out of a car, one still in, or picking our teeth, or slouching, or scratching our noses or burns. If naked, seen gracefully reclining through a gauzy mist, which is where movie stars come in: they assume such poses for us. They are our younger selves as they recede from us, glow, turn mythical. (Atwood 2000, 311)

In this passage, Atwood is drawing our attention to the problem of identifying the self with the body. There may be no other identification to make, but let us not pretend that it is always a positive identification. Similarly, this passage suggests something of the anxieties associated with

ageing: the body that defies our command, the body that lets us down. Taking seriously such experiences may lead to a deeper engagement with the significance of loss for defining the human condition. Yes, there is growth and development, but there is also decay and death and these aspects have to be held together if we are to make sense of what it is to be a human being.

### *The Dying Body*

These points can be taken further when contemplating the dying body. May Sarton's novel *A Reckoning* ([1981] 1997) has already been subjected to a thorough and profound analysis by Maaike de Haardt (1999). In her essay, de Haardt suggests that Sarton's depiction of a dying person presents a challenge to an easy dismissal of the problems associated with human mortality. In part, I shall extend her analysis, while emphasizing what we might learn about the nature of human existence if we focus on the experience of dying. Obviously reflection on such an experience is wrought with difficulties. The dying are rarely in a position to tell us what the experience is like. And if they are, attempts to talk about the experience can be met by denial of the situation or by embarrassment in those around them. Sarton's novel evidently suffers from the limitation that it is a literary piece: an imaginative engagement with the experience of dying. Allowing for these limitations, let us consider the ideas that Sarton brings to bear upon this experience.

Sarton's central character is Laura, an editor who has been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Initially, she experiences a sense of excitement as she starts her final journey. Death is visualized as an unknown adventure, something that Laura can shape as she deems fit: 'I am to have my own death' (Sarton 1997, 7). This initial account of death suggests, with philosophers like Heidegger, that mortality affirms one's individuality: Laura can shape her own death much as she has shaped her own life. In this sense, death is not opposed to life, but is an integral part of the dance of life itself (Sarton 1997, 9). It is not an alien, intrusive other but part of 'a natural process' (38). Such thoughts seem to cohere

with the view that death need not be taken as the defining characteristic of human beings: if anything, it can be viewed simply as part of the process of life and death which governs the cycles of the natural world.

Yet such a life-affirming acceptance of death is not Laura's only response to her situation. At times, she expresses a fear of death which bears witness to the loneliness of the experience of dying: 'I'm not ready ... I can't do it alone' (10; my emphasis); 'it's a lonely business, dying' (37; my emphasis). Laura's journey into the unknown can only be taken by herself, and, while that may have seemed initially exciting, at times it seems quite unbearable. But it is not only the final destination which results in fear: Laura also experiences the fear 'of getting more and more ill, of pain' (88). What might seem like an exciting journey in the early days of her illness, when she is, if you like, still herself, becomes something fearful when the gradual decay of the body is taken into account. The self is the body: so what happens to the self when the body starts to break-down? As Atwood's Iris puts it: 'Please don't mistake this rambling angst for stoicism. I take my pills, I take my halting walks, but there's nothing I can do for the dread' (Atwood 2000, 475).

Sarton suggests that part of the solution to this problem lies with affecting an escape from the body. Listening to music becomes a particularly significant way of doing this: Laura effectively loses herself in beautiful pieces of music. Through listening to them, she is able to transcend her pain. Similarly, she develops the ability to float above the body (Sarton 1997, 185). These techniques enable a feeling of detachment from the dying body: it is simply 'a piece of machinery that [is] running down' (213). As it cannot be cajoled into responding, it has to be 'quite simply rejected as irrelevant' (214). Yet the situation cannot be resolved so easily, and suggests that however attractive such dualistic interpretations of the self might be, ultimately they neglect the fact that we are our bodies. Laura feels, if anything, 'even more enclosed in her body' (145). And this identification of her self with the dying body is by no means a positive experience. At the same time, however, she recognizes that there is nowhere else to go: 'I do not believe that we wish to leave our bodies,

perhaps it is that. Mine is of very little use to me now, but—' (218). The body cannot just be rejected, leaving the self intact. If anything, the experience of the sick body leads to the experience of the loss of selfhood. During one bout of sickness Laura feels that she has been 'stripped down to this vomiting animal, waiting for the seizure to pass' (167). Laura's experience suggests something of the complexity of being an embodied being. Much as she might like to reject the dying body, she cannot. Drawing upon imagery from St Francis of Assisi—she sees herself as a unity of her thoughts and body: 'Somehow we are in our bodies ... Brother Ass and Brother Angel' (220). But this recognition will not always be a cause for celebration, particularly when the body is a sick or dying one.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Embodiment**

It is life-sustaining to understand that things are always more complex than they seem (hooks 1996, 289). In using these rather disturbing examples of what it means to be an embodied being in a physical universe, I have not intended to support a pessimistic view of human existence. Rather, my desire is to attempt to think seriously about the complexity of human life. The feminist desire to reject dualistic formulations of both reality and the self are arguably grounded in the desire to reject simplistic categorizations of existence. Yet in practice such attempts can sometimes simply replace one inadequate paradigm with another. Thus, key exponents of feminist philosophy of religion argue that an emphasis on birth rather than death will lead to a radically different vision of human life and its meaning. Yet defining natality in opposition to mortality suggests a tacit acceptance of the logic of oppositional dualism, and this provides too simplistic a response to the issues we face. I prefer a different strategy: a strategy that seeks to *unite* such apparent opposites. It is only by holding together such dualisms and seeing them as reciprocally related that we might be able to move towards a richer understanding of human life.

Such a move will have important consequences for shaping a methodology for a feminist philosophy of religion. Feminist philosophers of religion are concerned to grapple with what possible meaning can be assigned to religion for the contemporary world. In revisiting and reclaiming the fact of human embodiment, we have sought to place meaning firmly in this world. Religion should not, then, provide an escape mechanism from the trials of human life. Yet neither, it seems to me, should feminists seek to create a Pollyanna world where the fundamental problems inherent in embodiment are avoided. In certain situations it will be difficult to see embodied existence as a good, pure and simple; and we should be prepared to allow such negative experiences to challenge our theorizing. The concern must be to develop a philosophy of religion that coheres with the 'lived experience' of being human (cf. Anderson 1998, 33). And that experience is defined by complexity. We live in a complex world where natural cycles may be both beautiful and necessary, but where they often cause sorrow and pain for human beings. Engagement with embodiment confronts us with both the joy and sorrow of human existence, and it is only by accepting both that we might arrive at a more meaningful account of what it is to be a human being in a physical universe.

### **NOTES**

1. See, for example, the articles in the special edition of the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* (Vol. 19 No. 1 Spring 1998) 'Beginning with Birth?'
2. The word 'embodiment' can be read as suggestive of a dualistic understanding of human being: we are minds 'embodied' in the physical. Such a reading is not my intention (although it may suggest something of the difficulty attested to in our language of escaping from a dualistic concept of the self), and this term is used here as a less clumsy alternative to 'bodiliness'.
3. This is not, of course, to say that human suffering has not been addressed by feminist theologians: see, for example, Eiesland (1994). My concern is that feminist philosophers of religion offering the paradigm of natality as a way forward in

our theorizing about human being tend to downplay physical suffering which is attributable to natural processes rather than structural evils.

4. See Ruether (1993); McFague (1993).

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## Ageing, Embodiment and Identity

By Jean Grimshaw

This paper was written during the period when I had my sixtieth birthday. This required a considerable amount of negotiation of brand new categories; 'retired', for example (is this supposed to be an occupation in itself, or having none?); or 'pensioner'. I have oscillated between a feeling of strong resistance to them (I hate describing myself as 'retired' and I don't think of being a pensioner as an 'identity'), and a strong wish also not to lapse into the kind of denial which would make me see myself as an exception, or as 'beyond' these categories.

The paper is anchored at various points by discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's writings on old age. As with her analysis of 'femininity' in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir's work on old age was groundbreaking, but it has not received anything like the attention given to her work on femininity. The fact that ageing has rarely, at least until recently, been a central issue in second wave feminist writing itself perhaps bears out de Beauvoir's analysis of the ways in which the old are perceived as 'Other'.

The first section of the paper is about ageing and embodiment, and I shall begin by quoting part of a poem by Sylvia Plath, since I think it raises some interesting issues.

### Ageing and Embodiment

#### Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.  
 Whatever I see I swallow immediately  
 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.  
 I am not cruel, only truthful ...

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,  
 Searching my reaches for what she really is.  
 Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon,  
 I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.  
 She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.  
 I am important to her. She comes and goes.  
 Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.  
 In me she has drowned a young woman, and in me an old  
 woman  
 Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish.  
 (Plath 1971, 52)

Plath's mirror is silver and exact; on one reading of the poem at least, it is supposed to reflect the truth of what is there, to show me what I really look like. This is a popular conception of mirrors. But interpreting mirrors is a culturally learned skill. What I see when I look in the mirror is a complex and unstable construction, made more complex by our cultural belief in the truthfulness of mirrors. I see a conglomeration of features, each of which could be isolated and described, but I do not see 'the truth', since there is no 'truth' of how I look. I look at myself through the internalized other in me. I cannot arrive at a sense of how I look which is independent of this internalized other, since how I think I look, and how I would describe that look, is necessarily informed by the reciprocal gazing of humans at each other, and that itself by current repertoires of descriptions of appearance. I see what I think or guess that others see; but what they see may vary widely and it may be highly unclear to me. I may also see a set of features that I may try to 'map' on to my current sense of my life, my identity and my concerns. Sometimes they seem to 'fit'; at other times they seem dissonant. Can the person I feel myself to be really look like that? As I proceed, I want to bear in mind this distance, dissonance and ambiguity.

### The Embodied Self

To say that human selves are embodied has become something of a philosophical platitude. Without the body we cannot think the self. Merleau Ponty argued that the ground of human action was not thinking, conceived of as a purely mental activity, but movement and motility (Merleau Ponty 1990). The body is our general medium for having a world, and human consciousness and action are rooted in an ability to move in the world. My body is not an object in space for me like other objects; it 'inhabits' space, in the sense that the space around me, the objects in it and the possible movements of my body are integrated for me in an overall orientation and all gain significance from each other. It is for this reason that it is so hard to imagine the world without me in it. If I think about the world after I am dead, I imagine myself looking on, as still spatially located within it, a spectator at least, even if no longer an actor. I cannot imagine myself without a point of view, and at least an attenuated form of embodiment.

But although my body is not for me an object like other objects, there is nevertheless an important sense in which I 'objectify' it. Although I do not perceive or experience it in the same way as I can perceive or experience other objects or other people (I cannot, for instance, watch it unobserved, walk round it, see its back view without the aid of mirrors, or pick it up), I do nevertheless perceive it. In so doing I am 'distanced' from it, since what I perceive is a construction necessarily informed by the perceptions that others may have of me, and by the fact that I am an object in their world.

The effect of this distance is that I think of my body as something to which I have a relationship, which has shifting and diverse modes. My body can, for instance, be experienced at times as something like a companion or friend whom I can take for granted; something un-self-consciously 'with me' on tasks that I perform, about which I do not need to think too much, and whose aptness or well being does not require too much thought. Merleau Ponty's analysis of 'habit' captures something of the quality of this type of relationship. He writes of the ways in which

skills and abilities become integrated into our body schema such that the body is not an object for an 'I think', but rather a group of lived through meanings.

Merleau Ponty contrasted what he considered this 'normal' way of being in the world with motor disturbances or disabilities such as aphasia or apraxia, which affect a person's ability to act or move 'normally'. But, as I have argued elsewhere (Grimshaw 1999), he does not sufficiently problematize the concept of 'the normal', and he does not discuss the many other ways in which this relatively unselfconscious integration of body and world can be precarious or disrupted, and the body can become the object of a wide range of feelings and interventions.

My body can be my accomplice and collaborator. I can—sometimes quite deviously—attempt to dress it up or modify it for some audience in order to project some image of myself that I have in mind. I can attempt to make it sexually or socially 'invisible'. I can have a narcissistic or erotic relationship to it; I can be in love with what I see in the mirror or what I feel when I touch my body. I can feel 'at one' with it, my sense of my identity so integrated with what I see in the mirror that I feel I really am 'looking at myself'. But I may also hate my body and feel ashamed of it; plenty of feminist writers have written about the endemic shame that seems to inflict most women when they feel that their bodies do not live up to impossible ideals of beauty or youthfulness.

My body can also be obstacle, enemy, traitor, deceiver. It can be experienced as an obstacle at the irruption of socially mediated biological events such as puberty, pregnancy, menopause; or through illness and the temporary or permanent onset of various disabilities. The precariously unselfconscious way in which my body 'accompanied' me before has been fractured. It has let me down and failed me; it seems to defeat my purposes and I can no longer rely on it. It is constantly in the foreground of my attention rather than the background, and I have to find new strategies of coping with it. One of these strategies may be a strange distant cousin of Cartesianism: I try to distance myself from my body and think that it is 'not me' any more. Simon Williams has labelled this

strategy 'dys-embodiment', born of bodily dysfunction and dys-ease (Williams 1996).

My body can also deceive me; I may feel that I do not know how to 'read' it any more, or what it is that I see when I look at my face in the mirror. Sometimes I may see someone who does not 'look like me' at all; I may strategically arrange the circumstances of my looking at myself (no specs, subdued lighting etc.) such that what I see bears the closest resemblance possible to what I think I would like to see, or what I can connect with my sense of myself.

My relation to my body and my face, and the various forms of 'distance' that I may feel from them, are thus inseparable from the ways in which I look at myself as if through the eyes of others, though I may find it impossible to know how others really see me. As a consequence of this, they are inseparable from the kinds of norms or ideals which inform the perceptions that others have of me. But my perceptions of how I look are also informed by my sense of the narratives of my own life.

I may evolve a body-conception, a sense of how I look, which I relate to my conception of a certain stage in my life, and to the desires, goals and aspirations which characterize it. But then, more or less suddenly, things seem to become 'out of synch'. My sense of my own life does not seem to have changed that much, but my body has, and it begins to feel like a stranger to me. Alternatively, it may seem to me that I still look much the same, but I have difficulty 'reading' the current patterns of my life in terms of that look.

I want to lead into the rest of what I have to say by suggesting that this kind of 'objectification' of the body, this sense of distance or dissonance between 'myself' and 'my body', this feeling that my reading of my face or my body and my conception of myself are in some way 'out of synch' is not some remediable disorder which we might simply hope to transcend. It is part of what it means to be an embodied human self. But things are complicated by the fact that there are certain forms of this distance or dissonance which might well be seen as remediable. With this in mind, I now turn to de Beauvoir.

### The Ageing Body

In the epilogue to *Force of Circumstance*, first published in 1963 when she was 54 years old, de Beauvoir wrote:

Since 1944, the most important, the most irreparable thing that has happened to me is that ... I have grown old. ... To convince myself of this, I have but to stand and face my mirror. I thought, one day, when I was forty: Deep down in that looking glass, old age is watching me and waiting for me: and it's inevitable, one day it'll get me. It's got me now. I often stop, flabbergasted, at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face ... I loathe my appearance now; the eyebrows slipping down towards the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. Perhaps the people I pass in the street see merely a woman in her fifties who simply looks her age, no more, no less. But when I look, I see my face as it was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure ...

Yes, the moment has come to say: 'Never again! It is not I who am saying goodbye to all those things that I once enjoyed; it is they who are leaving me; the mountain paths disdain my feet. ... Never again shall I slide down through the solitary morning snows. Never again a man. Now, not my body alone but my imagination too has accepted that. In spite of everything, it's strange not to be a body any more. ... But what hurts more than all these deprivations is never feeling any new desires: they wither before they can be born in this ratified climate I inhabit now. (de Beauvoir 1968, 672–73)

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir famously argued that one is not born a woman, one becomes one. In the preface to *Old Age* (de Beauvoir 1972), de Beauvoir notes, similarly, that old age, albeit a 'biological' phenomenon, is always socially mediated. Even though we may legit-

mately speak at times of the 'decline' of the organism, 'decline' itself only has meaning in a social context. In writing of her own old age, however, as Penelope Deutscher has noted, she seems, in the passage quoted, to think of it as a mere fatality about which nothing can be done (Deutscher 1999). The passage, Deutscher suggests, seems devoid of the sort of self-critique one might have expected from the author of *The Second Sex* and *Old Age*. Deutscher comments that it may tell us more about the specificity of de Beauvoir's own attitudes to embodiment, sexuality and femininity and about her own internalization of the attitudes of society to old age than it tells us about the necessary consequences of growing old.

The most puzzling remark in the passage is that 'it's strange not to be a body any more'. It is difficult to know how to read this remark, since *Old Age* abounds with descriptions of the insistent bodily problems which may be at the forefront of consciousness when one is old. It seems to mean, rather, the death of one's own bodily pleasures and desires, and the death of those aspects of one's appearance one assumed essential to giving pleasure to others or taking pleasure in oneself.

It is plain that there is a need, however hard it may be in practice, to contest by any means we can the view that older bodies or faces are disgusting and unavoidably perceived with abhorrence, that bodily pleasures must die with old age, or that becoming older necessarily means the death of sexuality (and it is worth noting again that de Beauvoir was only in her fifties when she wrote this). Feminist writers have written a great deal about the ways in which women have become victims of pernicious body ideals and norms of feminine appearance, and forms of 'objectification' which devalue all women who are neither beautiful nor young. In some feminist writing, however, it seems to me that a contrast is at least implicitly drawn between such forms of 'objectification' and a hypothetical state of being permanently at ease with one's body; 'accepting it' or 'being happy with it as it is'. Or it is suggested that 'I am a person to whose identity my body or how I look should be irrelevant. I am 'the

same person' whether I am fat or thin, young or old, able-bodied or non able-bodied; it is the 'person within' that counts.

Both of these responses are highly problematic, for the following reasons. First, the view that one should simply 'accept' one's body does not take account of the instability of all of its states. The body constantly changes; it is prone to the sudden irruption of major 'biological' events, and to the slower processes of change such as growth, and in the end, failure and decline. At most the body is only ever in a precarious and temporary state of equilibrium, and all negotiations of its states are temporary. The body is always a problem in human life.

Second, all my conceptions of my body and my appearance are, as I have argued before, constructed at least partly out of the kinds of 'objectification' produced by the internalized other in me and the ways in which I therefore necessarily objectify myself. The notion of 'accepting' one's body or 'being happy with it as it is' seems to imply that there is a 'natural' body, some kind of given which underlies the forms of objectification and social inscription which are being contested. But there is no such thing as 'the body as it really is' or 'the body as it really looks' that can abstracted from the ways in which it is constructed by social norms and social intercourse.

Third, my relation to my body and my appearance depends also on my sense of their relation to the narratives of my life. My sense of my own identity depends on the kinds of narratives which both I and others could tell about me. (It may also have unconscious elements, but that does not affect the main points I wish to make here). These narratives are derived from social roles and categories, and from notions of ages and stages of life which create intelligible life patterns in a particular society. There is indeed a sense in which my relationship to these things may be uneasy. They are broad and generic; they may be contradictory and contested; and they are not static. I may have difficulty relating my own sense of my feelings and aspirations to the kinds of social narratives within which it appears I am supposed to read them. But many of these social narratives also have a temporal reference: 'what I was' or 'what I

will be' are anchored not merely in my own personal history, but in broader conceptions of ages and stages of life. Such temporal narratives carry with them both conceptions and personal histories of embodiment. The relation between my understanding of contemporary social narratives, my sense of my own feelings and aspirations, and my sense of my own embodiment is one which requires constant negotiation and permanently presents the possibility of the experience of dissonance and dislocation.

### Ageing and Identity

I now want to return to de Beauvoir's account of old age. In *Force of Circumstance*, *Old Age*, and *All Said and Done*, and in the conversations with Sartre published in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, de Beauvoir writes of old age not merely as a time of physical decline, but in terms of a kind of despair born of the shrinking of time and the shortening of the future, and the difficulty of conceiving of, or embarking on, projects in the light of this. *Old Age* was published in 1972, when de Beauvoir was 64, and the picture it paints is mostly a depressing one. De Beauvoir looks at the social consequences of becoming old, and the existential ones which follow in their wake; the being-in-the-world of old age. Old people are frequently despised and marginalized. They are subject to poverty, ridicule, decrepitude and despair. Existentially, de Beauvoir notes the ways in which the body may decline and become a hindrance. She writes of depressing aspects of the experience of old age: boredom and monotony; the feeling of being useless and of no value; the lack of autonomy in institutions; the feeling of having a limited future; the lapse into habit and the decline of imagination and daring. The mind can lose its edge; our visions are no longer given life by fresh projects. The old may experience emptiness, inactivity and indifference to the world; powerlessness; feelings of inferiority and of being lower status or second class citizens. Age can also become an alibi or excuse for stagnant days and the diminution of mental life into habit or routine. Retirement may bring a sense of being on the scrap heap.

In the face of these kinds of social and existential consequences of becoming old, it is not surprising that de Beauvoir claims that we see the aged as Other. Age is that which we cannot recognize in ourselves or our own futures. She writes: 'When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that *that* will never happen to us—when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to' (1972, 5). So can we change this situation? First, de Beauvoir argues that the ways in which people are forced to lead deprived and monotonous lives robs them of the resources to deal with retirement and old age. It is only a fortunate few who have the material and intellectual resources which can give them a margin of freedom to escape from the worst consequences. The situation of old people must be seen as a consequence of the orientation of the whole society around profit and exploitation. Questions about old age are one aspect of much larger questions about how we should live.

But second, de Beauvoir says that we should stop being in denial. We must learn, she says, to recognize ourselves in the old woman or the old man, and in the old person that we shall become. We must stop trying to pretend that we are not old (as in the case of the woman who goes to desperate measures to try to keep looking young), and stop behaving as if we ourselves will not get old. If we displace on to the other what we will not recognize in ourselves, it will be at their expense, since it will prevent us from taking seriously the task of changing the material and social circumstances under which most old people live.

But if there is no simple objective truth to 'old age', then it may well be unclear what 'accepting that one is old' or 'accepting that one will grow old' should mean. De Beauvoir herself notes the tension between, on the one hand, the importance of recognizing age in oneself and not perceiving the old as 'other', and on the other hand, the importance of not experiencing old age merely as a fatality about which nothing can be done, despite the fact that she herself sometimes seems to do this. It is too easy to read de Beauvoir as simply prescribing a change of attitude towards the old. There is also an important strand in her thinking which

argues that no matter how hard we try, we can never adequately anticipate old age in ourselves. She writes that we are incapable of 'realizing' old age; and it is to her concept of the 'unrealizable' that I now turn.

### The Unrealizable

The concept of 'the unrealizable' was used by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] 1969). Sartre argues that I am never able fully to determine or to have a sense of what I am, since what I am and what I think myself to be always depends on the fact that I am an object in the Other's world.

Sartre writes:

The true limit of my freedom lies purely and simply in the very fact that ... my situation ceases for the Other to be a situation and becomes an objective form in which I exist as an objective structure. ... In short, by the fact of the Other's existence, I exist in a situation which has an outside and which due to this very fact has a dimension of alienation which I can in no way remove from the situation any more than I can act directly upon it. (Sartre 1969, 525)

In *Old Age*, de Beauvoir deploys the concept in a similar way. Thus, she writes:

Whether we like it or not, in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view. ... It is impossible for us to experience what we are for others in the for-itself mode: the unrealizable is 'my being seen from without which bounds all my choices and which constitutes their reverse aspect'. (de Beauvoir 1972, 290–91)

In *Old Age*, de Beauvoir extends the concept of the unrealizable not just to what I am at any given time, but to my conception of my future. Her central idea here is that at any stage in a person's life, it is hard or impossible to imagine the 'foreign country' of its future stages. We can imagine such future stages only through our perception of others and our understandings of the social narratives through which they will be mediated. We cannot imagine 'what it will be like', and when we encounter it, 'what

it is like' may lead to confusion. Adulthood, for instance, is 'unrealizable' for a child. I can remember seeing the face and body of a girl approaching womanhood in the mirror, but not 'feeling like a woman', or having any idea what 'feeling like a woman' was supposed to mean. I can also remember thinking that I *ought* to feel like a woman (or even better, to quote Aretha Franklin, like a 'natural woman'). Similarly, I may see the face of what looks like an old person, but not 'feel old'—or have any idea what 'feeling old' should mean. The appearance of old age may seem like a mask that I have been forced to put on; it may generate the feeling 'that can't be me' when I look in the mirror.

De Beauvoir writes:

In our society the elderly person is pointed out as such by custom, by the behaviour of others and by the vocabulary itself: he is required to take this reality upon himself. There is an infinite number of ways of doing so, but not one of them will allow me myself to coincide with the reality that I assume. Old age is something beyond my life, outside it—something of which I cannot have any full inward experience. (de Beauvoir 1972, 291)

Within me, it is the person I am for the outsider—the Other—who is old. But that Other is also myself. In one sense I am that other; in another sense I am not. I am, because in the end I cannot simply deny the impact of time and biological realities. I am not, because, as de Beauvoir puts it, 'it is impossible for us to experience what we are for others in the for-itself mode'. All unrealizables, she suggests, tend to provoke the assertion that: 'As far as I am concerned it is not the same thing' (1972, 294). We view ourselves from a distance, try to picture ourselves through how others see us, or how we think they see us. We submit to the outsider's view, though we may have extreme difficulty in knowing what this is. But there is an inevitable dissonance, a dislocation between how we think we are seen by others and how we feel in ourselves.

This dislocation is a feature of all 'transitions' which are socially marked as central patterns in human lives. But old age is particularly

problematic. Adulthood may be 'unrealizable' for a child, but it is not surrounded with opprobrium, and it can be anticipated at times with an abstract kind of pleasure ('When I am grown up...'), or experienced as of value, however confusing it is ('Now I am grown up...'). In some cultures which value and respect old age, it might be possible to anticipate 'When I am old...' with some sort of pleasure. In our own, it is hard to anticipate it with anything except, at best, a somewhat pessimistic resignation, and at worst, fear and dread.

There is a great deal that we could do to expose and contest the negative images of old age that are endemic in our society. There is a great deal that we could do to ensure that old people do not live in poverty or hardship, and do not feel that they are marginalized or 'on the scrap heap', though the kinds of social changes needed to achieve this would be quite radical. We should not suppose, however, that the kinds of distress and confusion that result from transitions from one 'stage' of life to another can ever simply be eliminated. They are never wholly remediable, and they are certainly not remediable by the kinds of exhortation de Beauvoir gives us at times to 'see ourselves in that old woman'.

This exhortation is, in fact, at odds with de Beauvoir's own analysis of the inevitability of the 'dislocation' involved in growing old, since it is also her view that there is a sense in which we can *never* see ourselves in that old woman. She writes:

We must assume a reality that is certainly ourselves although it reaches us from the outside and although we cannot grasp it. There is an insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation. All we can do is to waver from the one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together. (de Beauvoir 1972, 290)

We are faced with a complex negotiation between 'I am', and 'I am not'. 'I am old' may suggest alienation from self and an acceptance of what others impose on me. 'I am not old' may suggest burying one's head in

the sand, an untenable struggle to believe that I am quite different and that social categories do not really apply to me. The problems with 'I am' are resignation, giving up, defeatism, failure to contest what can or should be contested. The problems with 'I am not' are self-deception, refusal to confront one's own problems and denial of the problems of others. We are faced with an unstable oscillation between the two, and the problem is neither to deny limits and change, nor concede too much to them too readily. But it is rarely plain where the boundaries between the two lie.

I think that one of the strengths of de Beauvoir's view of old age lies in this analysis of the inevitability of the dislocations involved in growing old. Commentators such as Deutscher (1999) and Moi (1994) have been too ready to accuse de Beauvoir simply of defeatism or of accepting stereotypes of old age in her own life. De Beauvoir herself rightly insists that old age, like femininity, is always socially mediated. But there is nevertheless a profound difference between femininity and old age. We could conceive of a human future in which the aspects of socially constructed femininity analysed by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* had been eliminated. We could not, however, similarly conceive of a future in which human beings did not experience senescence and the various limits it imposes, nor one in which old age was not a problem. In this sense, old age, for those who do not die before they reach it, is 'destiny' in a way that femininity is not. This is not, of course, to say that we should not contest the unnecessary hardship and marginalization often suffered by old people, but we should not suppose that we can ever eliminate all the difficulties and deprivation that getting old may bring. We may also contest some of the stereotypes of the elderly which wreak havoc on self-esteem, such as the idea that an old woman's body is disgusting; but we should not suppose that in so doing we are required simply to be 'happy' with or 'accept' our own. We may work to improve the life conditions of old people, but we should not suppose that doing so requires us, as it were, to experience our own futures in advance and have a kind

of empathy with age that the concept of the 'unrealizable' suggests is impossible.

### Age and Time

De Beauvoir, as we have seen, expressed dismay and disgust at the ageing of her body, and offered an analysis of the 'unrealizability' of old age. But there is another recurring theme in her writings on old age, which I now want to discuss. She constantly stresses the shrinking of time that comes with age, and the difficulty or impossibility of undertaking projects in the light of this. There is of course a sense in which the shrinking of time cannot be avoided. At fifty, I could say to myself, 'With luck, I have another twenty years of active life before I become *really* old'. At sixty, it is less easy to say this.

But de Beauvoir's pessimism about the shrinking of the future is also, I think, a consequence of a particular view of life which she shared with Sartre. Whilst working on this paper, I re-read *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*. The book includes transcripts of long conversations de Beauvoir had with Sartre some years before his death (de Beauvoir 1985). A friend of mine who also read it, commented: 'They take themselves so seriously; they really believe in their own importance'. This highlighted for me an unease which I have at times felt about de Beauvoir's writing; it is her lack of a 'light touch', of humour, or of a certain ironic distance from her conception of her own life and that of Sartre. De Beauvoir's view of old age is, I think, massively inflected by her sometimes implicit but often explicit view that the only 'life well lived' is one which is orientated around an all-consuming project, a goal to which everything else in life is secondary. In *Old Age*, she sometimes seems to make concessions to alternative visions of a life well lived: thus she writes that people who have varied interests may cope better with old age than those who have put all their eggs in one basket. But she also writes almost scornfully at times of 'hobbies', 'pastimes', things which are not taken up fully 'seriously' and do not form part of an overall life project. She also notes that the possibility of a 'life project' in this sense is one which it is not possible for

many people to have. But she ascribes this to lack of choices, and to life circumstances which condemn many people to a life of drudgery and leave them with few resources once that has ended. She does not seriously entertain the idea that there might be other ways of living or other life patterns which could be equally viable or satisfactory.

For me this ties in interestingly with her discussion of female writers in *The Second Sex*. The novelists she rates most highly are all male—Tolstoy, for instance. However talented female novelists may be, she sees their writing as lacking the 'broad view', the grand sweep of the depiction of history in the making. She ascribes this at least partly to the fact that they are less single-minded, more distracted by other constraints in their lives. Feminist critics have commented on the 'masculinism' of her discussion of the novel. With great caution, I think that the same might be said of her discussion of the life project in *Old Age*. It is not, of course, the case that many men have the opportunity, even if they so wished, to devote their lives to such a project, nor is it the case that no women do. But the concept of a life in which everything else is secondary to an over-riding goal or purpose is arguably paradigmatically masculine rather than feminine.

A life project needs a life. Apart from her despair and dismay at its physical signs, de Beauvoir has particular difficulty with ageing because in her fifties and sixties she can no longer think in terms of a 'whole life' project, and a future of which this is not a defining characteristic is not one she can readily accept, or one in which she can see any value.

In a recent book, *Mother Time: Women, Aging and Ethics* (which I reviewed for *Women's Philosophy Review* no.26, 2000), a concept which is central to a number of the articles is that of the 'career self' (Walker 2000). Margaret Urban Walker, for instance, suggests that a dominant cultural ideal is that of an energetic, self-disciplined and orderly life based on individual effort and achievement. This is underpinned by gleanings from philosophical views of the self which, whilst differing from each other in many ways, nevertheless see life as a quest involving central commitments and goals which are constitutive of identity, and assume

the ability to order the narratives of one's life around a central plan. The concept of 'retirement' seems to identify these central commitments with productive or paid employment, and to suggest that when this ceases, life is almost over.

I have encountered a version of this since I retired. Ex-colleagues from academia sometimes ask me in a puzzled way what I am 'doing with myself since I retired. When I tell them that I have a job working for the Dementia Care Trust in Bristol, and that I am doing a course in textiles, I am often met with silence and a look of slight incomprehension that I am not just doing what I did before, albeit in an attenuated kind of way. But I am inclined to think that insofar as the concept of the 'career self' is an apt one for giving an account of the way people lead their lives, this is primarily because of the exigencies of survival in stressful and competitive work environments, and the extreme difficulty of living much of a life outside these pressures. They marginalize other aspects of life and infect the soul, such that a different kind of life may become inconceivable, and one comes to need that which is also destructive. Marx is not very fashionable nowadays, but in his early writings he had a vision of a life for human beings which was not dominated by the grind of productive labour under capitalism, but in which there was space for the enjoyment of other activities. This has sometimes been dismissed as a romantic fantasy. It seems to me, however, that it is indeed the case that the 'unbalancing' of human lives that results from inhospitable, stressful and competitive work environments is one important reason why many people find retirement and ageing so difficult to contend with.

A critique of the idea of the 'career self' should, however, be undertaken with caution. Margaret Walker, for instance, suggests that insofar as women have adopted the model of the 'career self' for their lives, they put themselves increasingly at risk of feeling that life is over when they cease paid employment. Walker and Ruddick also suggest that models of ageing which stress the importance of keeping busy, healthy

and active are derivative from the idea of a 'productive' life and can be intimidating.

Walker suggests that we seek alternatives to 'life as a career' and to 'the impending obsolescence of ageing career selves' (Walker 2000, 109). Women might find alternative meanings and life patterns in things such as spirituality and religion, in occult or holistic health practices. She and other writers in the collection also stress the importance of relationships. In a number of ways, contrasts are drawn between, on the one hand, the goods of action and the having of purposes and goals, and on the other, the goods of relationships or practices which are not seen as 'purposive' in the same sort of way.

I am suspicious of these kinds of contrasts for a number of reasons. First, it is surely misleading to suggest that relationships themselves do not involve activity, purposes and goals. Second, to live a life in which no one set of purposes or goals is all important or life defining does not mean that goals and purposes are not important. Third, it is wrong to suppose that having goals and purposes and leading a life which is active or 'busy' necessarily requires full physical health, strength or mobility. To suppose that it does is rather like supposing that someone who is paralyzed or in a wheelchair cannot 'do' anything.

Claims about what constitutes human well-being are notoriously contentious, but I am inclined to believe that one of the central things is the ability and opportunity to find goals and purposes which actively engage one's interest and concern. I am not sure how I would justify this, except by pointing to the devastation and dereliction prevalent among those who have not been fortunate enough to find them. Extreme examples of this can be found in the monotony, blankness and passivity of life in so many institutions in which old people live.

Severe degenerative conditions such as certain types of illness or dementia may undermine the capacity to act, and in the face of these conditions there may be little we can do except ameliorate the conditions of life as best we can, and respect and facilitate the shreds and shards of self and identity that remain. But with regard to ageing more generally,

there are many things that could be done. Much could be done about the enforced passivity, lack of autonomy and helplessness in old people's 'homes', and to support people in their own homes, as well as those who care for them. Much could be done to facilitate action and access for those who have the physical disabilities which sometimes come with old age, and are likely to afflict us all in the end. More difficult to contend with are the effects of lives lived in poverty, or in deadening and alienating work conditions which kill the spirit and provide no opportunities for imagining a life beyond the workplace. In this sense, the problems of old age may begin in childhood.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I have suggested that there are ways in which 'the crisis of ageing' cannot be avoided. 'Old age', as Bette Davis once said, 'is not for cissies!' But this 'crisis' is not solely the consequence of ageism and negative images of old age, of physical decline and illness, and of poverty and inadequate resources, though these things make it infinitely worse. It is also a consequence of the inevitable dislocations and uneven pace that characterize the transitions of human life and the changes in forms of embodiment that accompany them, as well as of the fact that our own futures are 'unrealizable' in the sense spelled out by de Beauvoir. We should not suppose that we can simply learn to 'accept' the shock of ageing bodies and faces, and changes in life patterns, by some kind of 'power of positive thinking', feminist or otherwise. If we ask the question: 'To what extent is my fear of old age based on the unrealizability of any future stage of my life and the dislocation that may emerge between my sense of my embodiment, my sense of myself, and the label 'old person'; and to what extent is it based on my own internalization of contestable aspects of the ways in which old people are seen?', the question will be unanswerable. But we will be better equipped to contest the marginalization and devaluation of old age if we recognize these things clear-sightedly.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Feminine and the Sacred*

Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, trans. Jane Marie Todd,  
Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK, 2001  
h/b £19.99 0 333 96917 0

First published in French in 1998, this book takes the form of a debate—an exchange of faxes and e-mails—between two women, Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, whose personal and professional association goes back over nearly 30 years. It centres on the nature of the sacred and in particular, its relationship or otherwise with the feminine. What is the sacred, and are women or the feminine uniquely connected, associated and at ease with the category? Or should they rather shun the whole topic at the dawning of a new millennium as retrograde and damaging—the product of cultures and societies that fear women and seek only to control and contain them?

Clément is the granddaughter of Russian Jewish holocaust victims. She is a seasoned traveller, diplomat and novelist. Kristeva, brought up in Orthodox Bulgaria under oppressive communist rule, is now a distinguished scholar and writer, and a practising psychotherapist living in France. They find common ground in the traditions of French language, philosophy, feminism and psychoanalysis, and in their shared experience of motherhood. In the exchange, Kristeva and Clément chew over their cultural inheritance—in the majority of cases, relishing the considerable differences between them. There is, however, such a deal of reflection, allusion, wit, poetry and some point scoring here, that it is hard to do justice to all the possibilities of this dialogue or, since musical metaphors abound throughout, this piece for two voices.

On one level, it is a collaborative discussion and exchange of ideas about the nature of the sacred, traversing the lines between Clément's

interest in anthropology—cross cultural patterns of human behaviour—and Kristeva's in the implications and applications of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the context of a post-enlightenment philosophy suspicious of religions and their transcendental claims. Drawing together possible points of contact between the sacred and the feminine, Kristeva and Clément make references to a host of examples. Here is Marianne, the icon of revolutionary France with her bloody flag uplifted, in company with Eva Peron, Dianomania, Teresa (of Calcutta), Catherine (of Siena), witchcraft and, of course, the virgin mother—'that knot that is taken for a hole' (135). There are also many examples, taken from different cultures, that refer to a discourse of purity and impurity in which the maternal body is marked as sacred and/or dangerous. These examples include the absolutely unwashed hair of Indian temple dancers and 'sacred prostitutes' and, from the *Mythologiques* of Lévi-Strauss, the Brazilian story of 'Girl-Crazy-About-Honey' who is punished for her attempts to break the sacred laws of a motherly, feeding love and gorge herself instead. And besides all that, there is a chorus of thousands—a line up of the great and the good in the Western world from Kant to Kristeva's husband, the writer Phillippe Sollers.

On another level, this is a sometimes edgy interchange touching on Clément's suspicions of non-materialist approaches in general and of the pre-eminence of Christian traditions in particular in Kristeva's work. I too am struck by the way in which Kristeva celebrates Christian traditions of biblical literature, Mariology, saintly mysticism, and the mystery of love with such gusto in these letters. But, of course, this should not be too surprising to readers familiar with her earlier work. In spite of her avowed atheism, Kristeva has, in effect, always placed value on the resources of the Christian tradition and theology, however de- or indeed re-mythologized these may be in the light of Freudian and, more significantly, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. So much is evident, for example, in her short essay, *In the Beginning Was Love* (1985), and in her reflection on the birth of her own son in 'Stabat Mater' (1977), placed on a divided page alongside an essay on traditions surrounding the mother of Christ.

Nevertheless, Clément's verbal 'raised eyebrows' draw attention to the sense in which Kristeva's work continues to merit examination by feminist readers concerned with the study of gender and theology in the Western tradition.

But it is certainly true that Kristeva's enthusiasm for Christian subject matters sometimes sets Clément's teeth on edge. She asks: 'How many more letters will there be on the subject of the virgin, Julia?' adding, with some asperity, 'I understood the lesson: without her, Eros would not have had right of citizenship in the Christian world, or women either.' (120) Characteristically in this correspondence, Clément sounds the stronger note of caution: Christianity's version of the sacred fits all too easily into a model that focuses on violent sacrifice, lack, and abjection. This is, of course, in keeping with Kristeva's own view of the development of the subject—her '*sujet en procès*' whose emergence and continued existence requires a sacrifice and is always a struggle. Clément asks whether perhaps there are other ways of looking at and for the sacred? Kristeva, unapologetic, travels deeper into contested territory. Considering her own experiences as a stranger, both foreigner and female, she writes: 'I have an infinite appreciation for the biblical and Christian idea that it is only from a "poorly squared stone" that the Light of Yahweh shines forth, and from which Christ and his Church arise.' (140)

Kristeva's 'poorly squared stone' is presumably 'the stone that the builders rejected' of Mark 12:10 (and its synoptic parallels). This reference is closely followed up with an extended description of how she would try to advise 'the magnificent Catherine of Siena' (140)—a tongue-in-cheek proposal, of course, but with some serious purpose. Saint Catherine, accustomed to the most strenuous and stressful of self-imposed duties, says Kristeva, would be instructed in simplicity. She would be told to meditate on a plain building tool: the mason's perpendicular or plumb line. We all need, Kristeva suggests, to be properly hooked up to some fixed point, some rule or principle, but maintaining a straight course—a straight back, as it were—through life is possible only if we

keep in mind the bob, the weight, which, for Kristeva, represents our unique handicaps, our unique 'rejected stones'. It is a recipe for what she calls the 'imaginary' (137), a variant of the *non-sacrificial* sacred 'which opens the mind and body to an inquietude without end, and makes it possible to stand straight and lithe in the world' (137). In a book full of quotable quotations, Clément then concedes that she has perhaps been harsh in her criticism of Kristeva's passion for the sacred in Christian saintliness, but adds that 'if I rave against the sacred, it is because, in moving like a she-cat around the tom, I get an inkling of all the places it has been' (143)!

Importantly, this is also a correspondence between two women who are mothers. As the letters or faxes are being exchanged, Kristeva's son, David, is taken ill and undergoes an emergency operation. Clément's daughter gives birth to a first grandchild after a long labour. Their concern as mothers gives authenticity to their discussion of motherhood as a primary location for the feminine sacred. Apart from these references to their children, Kristeva's reflections on the maternal are concentrated most obviously, within a psychoanalytical framework, on a child's earliest relationship to its mother as well as on the figure of the Virgin, who has been described from very early Christian traditions as the mother of God. Clément's response to the maternal is by no means unsympathetic but, once again, she sounds a cautionary note. 'There is an omnipotence of maternal attachment, I grant you', she writes, but she follows this with an almost brutal reference to the possibilities of maternal infanticide (83).

This is a feisty treat of a book containing as it does a rich philosophical insight that comes to no false sense of an ending since there is undoubtedly so much more to be said on the subject of the relationship between the feminine and the sacred. Any one of the avenues opened up here might profitably be taken further. I am intrigued, for example, by Clément's question as to whether waste—with its feminine and bodily associations—finds a place within the divine universe of the Western world. Given Christianity's preoccupation with miracles of healing the unclean and with the gruesome impurities of crucifixion torture, the role

of waste within its traditions, she says, is more ambiguous than within the other two 'Western' religions of Islam and Judaism (88).

The disadvantage of such a free-ranging discussion is precisely that no one issue is followed through to an entirely satisfying critical conclusion. On the other hand, the dialogic form does force the correspondents to maintain a clarity and economy of style that is, in Kristeva's case particularly, very welcome. A final sharp description of the whole enterprise is offered by Kristeva addressing Clément in the last letter of the collection: 'Decidedly you always need to attack the subject aggressively, an approach that is barely softened by humor! And that is all to the good: your verve has been the impatient and excited (I'm quoting you) note of our correspondence; as for myself, I have tried to reflect slowly in the background' (177).

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*French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*

Morni Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (eds), foreword by Catherine Clément, Routledge, 2002  
h/b £45.00 0 415 21537 4; p/b £15.99 0 415 21538 2

What is French feminism? Certainly a phenomenon that has given rise to widespread success in academic publishing; something to which almost every discipline in the humanities has turned its attention. This Routledge *Reader* adds to a growing list of readers and anthologies dedicated to making the work of the 'French feminists' accessible to a broad range of students. Its focus derives from the concerns and interests of religious studies, but it also aims to demonstrate the importance of religion (broadly conceived) in French feminist writing.

Yet what is French feminism? Neither an active political movement nor a coherent body of theoretical work, it somewhat aptly defies

conceptual definition. Of the five thinkers/writers included in the reader (Irigaray, Kristeva, Clément, Cixous and Wittig) few are actually French, none are strictly feminist as such, and most are atheists from the perspective of orthodox religion. But for anglophone readers familiar with European theory of the last three decades or so, French feminism exists. To their credit, in their introduction the editors take up this issue of what we might call the illusion of French feminism and the importance of the 'holy trinity' (Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous) for feminists and others across the seas. They acknowledge the somewhat contrived nature of the category, its selectivity with regard to the breadth of feminist writing and activity in France, and the way it has been harnessed by the Anglo-American academy for its own purposes. To a certain extent then, they accept Christine Delphy's acerbic criticisms of the notion of French feminism and its rise to prominence in an English-speaking world that apparently wishes to ignore what it is really like for French women (or indeed, any women?) on the ground, in favour of rather exotic representations of sexual difference and the feminine.

However, in response to Delphy's political attempt to discredit it, the editors do put forward a valiant defence, not only of French feminism as a construct, but also of the kind of thinking it entails. In so doing they construct a dichotomy between the tradition of materialist feminism in France that has been activist and concerned with socio-political questions linked to institutional change, and the 'French feminism' of sexual difference that has been concerned with theorizing subjectivity, gender and the symbolic. While this might be a useful, shorthand way for students to grasp the different tendencies in French thought, it is a dichotomy that should not be overstated. In their desire to attribute a certain cohesiveness to the notion of French feminism, the editors point to the early association of Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous and Clément with the *Psych et Po* movement and its activities. This seems a dubious argument, given not only the tenuous links some of these thinkers had with the group and its subsequent notoriety, but also the inherent resistance of such writers to allegiances that might over-determine them.

A more familiar move is made when the French women thinkers are attributed a shared inheritance from and indebtedness to certain contemporary male thinkers, specifically Lacan and Derrida. This is undoubtedly valid in different ways for the particular thinkers concerned. However, once again the broader philosophical picture (of Hegel and Heidegger, for example) is lost, to the benefit of recent male thinkers whose own philosophical dependencies are left unstated, and the women's independent relations to the philosophical tradition are obscured. What is more, without wishing to insist upon the unwanted maternity of Simone de Beauvoir, is it just and accurate to persist in downplaying her significance for all forms of French feminism, or to merely mention her thought in passing as a position which 'French feminism' opposes?

Admittedly, a reader is perhaps not the place for a significant re-reading of an intellectual scenario, and in their choice of material the editors have focused on those thinkers/writers who have already had some influence on Religious Studies. There are no new translations, although some of the texts have not been previously anthologized. Wittig aside, there are selections of texts from the different stages of each of the thinkers'/writers' work, introducing the reading audience to their work as a whole rather than writing concerned with religious themes in the strict and narrow sense. This is admirable for the way that it encourages the reader to think of their work as a theoretical questioning and re-writing of what the 'religious' might be, and as a challenge to the authoritarianism of some religious traditions and their legalistic moralizing. It does have the disadvantage that, for want of space, the texts are abridged, such that what are, on the whole, highly allusive texts become even more fragmented. However, in addition to a specific introduction to each thinker, each text is given a short introduction and is helpfully contextualized in a lucid manner. Students always have the option of seeking out the full version, but this reader is clearly designed for the impecunious student looking to buy just one text.

The *Reader* will surely prove a worthwhile purchase, for it is in the texts themselves that we might find some of the reasons for the continuing importance and enduring appeal of French feminism. As the editors argue, the particular theoretical drift in which these women write is one that stresses the need to reform symbolic structures if socio-cultural and, indeed, socio-economic change is to come about. Religions provide a rich heritage of imaginary and symbolic constructions that, as Clément discusses in her foreword, have played an important part in our pasts in spite of ourselves. The texts chosen include some of the most well-known in this area ('Divine Women', 'Stabat Mater', 'Sorceress and Hysteric', 'Sorties', 'The Lesbian Body'), but arguably they are all imaginative and creative in the 'feminine' way of opening the reading subject-in-process to inspiration. Instead of simply documenting the oppression and exploitation of patriarchal history or analyzing the systems of dominance forced upon women, there is a stress upon the other: the possibility of other worlds, other states of being and other symbolic structures.

No one religious tradition is privileged in any respect, and the *Reader* presents us with a diverse response from French thinkers to what is generally perceived to be an ineluctable aspect of culture. Thus Irigaray's dialectical insistence upon the divine as that which stresses continuity (whether between mind and body, or nature and culture) in contrast to the patriarchal insistence upon splits and schisms, may be compared with Cixous' and Clément's interests in heretical and marginalized behaviour in the form of the sacred understood as exceeding patriarchal rationality. Kristeva's intellectual subtlety is apparent in her psychoanalytical readings of religious figures and tropes, readings which she does not divorce from the important aim of psychoanalytical practice: the healing of the individual. Wittig stands out here as the one thinker who is not versed in psychoanalysis and her consequent aversion to the notion of sexual difference highlights her one-time affinities with the 'other', more materialist, French feminism. Yet the editors do us a service by including her, for Wittig gives equal attention to the need to

rewrite the symbolic structure of religion, and her creative imaginings of lesbian worlds provide a powerful and useful contrast to the female/masculine reference points of sexual difference. It is an indication of how rich 'French feminism' can be, and how much richer it might be for its anglophone audience if it were pursued its diversity and contrasts more fully.

So, this collection of texts by French feminists on religion does not necessarily give us an accurate representation of French feminism, or of what is more traditionally considered to be the domain of religion. But it does bring together for a specific audience some beautiful and impressive texts on the need to transform symbolic structures, most notably religious ones, by certain prominent women thinkers/writers writing in French. And in their insistence on the other, and the possibility of other worlds, they present a kind of affinity that, given their drive to go begin again in the face of adversity, is perhaps very feminine. The editors are right to present this as a matter that, for Irigaray, Kristeva, Clément, Cixous and Wittig, is a religious, divine, or sacred one.

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#### *The Ethics of Gender*

Susan Parsons, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002  
h/b £50.00 0 631 21516 6; p/b £15.99 0 631 21517 4

It occurs to me (having read it carefully twice) that perhaps this book's *thesis* is that a feminist humanism should be abandoned in favour of accepting 'subjection', which we can in any case do nothing about. I had been trying to reconcile what I read with the author's being (as I supposed) a feminist. But I am fairly baffled.

I can commence with what is good about the book, for I find it in some ways exciting. Suspecting theological ethics to have reached some

kind of nadir, Parsons wends her way through a wide variety of ethical positions and philosophical outlooks, considering their intersection with questions of gender. Turning to her postmodern perspective, the discussions of language, the body, or subjectivity are well done. One reads with mounting anticipation, curious to know why postmodernism should solve the problems that have been described.

To my mind, the best aspect of the book—and something I deeply admire—is Parsons' ability to enter into the thought of others and describe it, without rancour, from that author's perspective. She never sets up a position in such a way as then to be able, from her perspective, to demolish it. The thumbnail sketches of the positions of Irigaray, Charles Taylor, Nussbaum, Benhabib, and many others, including British feminists writing in theology, are superb for their perspicacity. As one whose work is discussed, I recognized myself in my deepest concerns. I thought others would feel likewise. One gains new insights into authors one knows and is introduced to those whom one doesn't. On this count alone the book was valuable to me.

I was slightly more ambivalent about the attempt to delineate positions in such a way as then to juxtapose them one with another. Perhaps this is hard to do without 'straight-jacketing' systems and then presenting them as mutually incompatible. But I found myself (as I often do) wanting to synthesize insights to be gleaned from different schools of feminist thought or, again, explanations of gender.

Thus I fail to see why the liberal feminist emphasis on rights cannot be brought together with a valuing (perhaps on a different level) of what differences between the sexes there may be. Nor is it the case that the 'rights' concerned need simply be those of the male Enlightenment, to which women's aspirations must then be assimilated. Thus, a thinker such as Jane Flax (not averse to postmodernism, I note) speaks interestingly of the 'right' of each person to come to speech and the need for appropriate structures to enable such participation. It is clear that feminism changes the Enlightenment project. I am not convinced, with Parsons, that it necessarily 'unravels' it.

Again, Parsons critiques the feminist understanding of gender as a construct, saying that it is a weakness of such a position that it relies upon an 'unconstructed' location from which to cast such a judgement. But what is wrong with taking it to be an ethical *a priori* that human beings are equal and (given this) proceeding to judge negatively a culture (or religion) in which 'male' has been the norm and 'woman' the other? Once again, doubtless gender is in large part a cultural creation. But is it necessary to rule out that biology has been *one element* which has fed into that construct? We do not, in saying this, become determinists.

I appreciated Parsons' recognition that those of us whom she would class as 'modernists' and feminists have developed a relational notion of the self. But is it true that 'centredness' and 'relationality' need be in tension? Feminism may be revolutionary here, dissolving previous dichotomies. Thus to be 'centred' is not at all what Carol Gilligan describes as displaying the rigid ego boundaries characteristic of an inadequate self. One achieves centredness in the midst of diverse relationships through which, if one is open, one is frequently buffered. Conversely, it is through coming to have a certain maturity and integration that a person is truly able to be present to another.

But Parsons would eschew all modernism, even its development in the hands of feminists and others which she so adequately describes. Her hero is Judith Butler (the only person in the book whose work is not dismantled). The result is what I can only judge a devastating passivity. Parsons writes: 'We are turned into ones who have been written about, spoken into subjection. In this too there is an ethics of linguistic acts ... which bears us into speaking as ones effaced and given up into words' (105–6). What, I ask myself, could it mean for a feminist to think thus? Are we quite powerless; left without agency of any description?

Parsons quotes de Beauvoir to the effect that it is men who have named the world and then confused their representation with absolute truth, with the implication that women should now come to speech. Subsequently she remarks: 'Might there be ... a form of subjection from which speaking no longer sets free, but which awaits a being-spoken, a

call, into which I may come to live, and in this might not the ethics of gender be turned into a hearing of the vocation of the human?' It is precisely in taking up such a stance that she seems to think the religious life consists. Thus she speaks of 'the possibility of faith, in which one agenda [presumably feminist humanism] is laid down, no longer holding sway, and another is assumed in response to a call' (150).

I wished that the acumen which Parsons brings to her deliberations on ethics was also to the fore in her consideration of theology. Incarnation is clearly fundamental to her thought: adopting Butlerian language, she speaks of the 'coming to matter of God in Christ' (177). This, it seems, is a faith statement, for which no grounds are given. She continues, apparently without hesitation, by speaking of 'the indifferent form of Christ, in whom is neither male nor female' (150). Now, one might argue (as she does not) that, given the patristic, neo-Platonic context in which incarnational theology was formed, what is intended is that God in Christ took on the 'universal', humanity, in which we all participate (an understanding lost with the rise of Nominalism, such that one individual instance of humanity tends to be divinized). But even then, could the term 'Christ' ever be gender neutral? Furthermore, how is it that (on the one hand) a transcendent, disembodied God and (on the other) a material, and lower, creation does not simply mirror the Cartesian mind/body split which Parsons would have us overcome?

I found interesting the discussion of Christianity as ecstatic. Yes indeed; and in a yet more radical sense than Parsons recognizes. For if Christianity is predicated upon revelation, and Christ is the truth, then one must break the self in order to be grounded in one who is not oneself (something the Lutheran tradition in particular has well understood). But for a feminist, is this not problematic; yet another reason not to be Christian?

Yet more fundamentally in relation to Parsons' project, I find myself perplexed as to what it could mean to count oneself a spiritual person, and then to espouse the position that she does. Does spirituality not involve, in some sense, having 'found' or 'come to' oneself? Are not

spiritual practices intended to bring about some kind of 'centredness' or 'collectedness'? Must there not be a commensurability between oneself and one's actions, which would seem to imply a certain self-integration or 'core'? If this is right, what then is the fit between the concept of the self which is implied and the shifting sands of living life as a 'performance'?

Parsons depicts feminist humanism as 'the attempt to fill up the empty place of God' (151). Indeed, key to her own development appears to have been coming to the conclusion that modernism has proved 'hollow'. I agree that Christianity and feminism make strange bedfellows. But there might be a way of thinking in terms of a dimension of reality which is God, to which we need not relate heteronomously as to an 'other'. Such a way of thinking is in no way antithetical to human self-actualization and feminist values.

Thus to my mind, a book which starts out with so much interest seems in the end to run out into the sand. I simply fail to see how the problems (as they are conceived) of feminism or modernism are resolved by submitting to the claims of mother church. (Parsons has recently converted to Catholicism.) The book is provocative and interesting. But it disappoints as our anticipation is thwarted. How should I not read the book's thesis as being, the pretensions of modernism having failed, we may as well throw in the sponge? But perhaps this is the point. The book is performative by getting nowhere. I had awaited a triumphant conclusion which was a resolution.

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### *The Ethics of Sex*

Mark D. Jordan, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002

h/b £50.00 0 631 218 173; p/b £15.99 0 631 218 18 1

Mark Jordan's book is presented as an introduction to Christian sexual ethics, and in this context, there are some initially surprising omissions. Most notably, little space is given to consideration of twentieth-century treatments of the topic, despite the fact that, as the author himself notes, this period has seen the most rapid and radical developments in the field. However, Jordan's aim is precisely not to present a 'definitive' guidebook to the terrain of sexual ethics, but rather to equip his readers with the tools to undertake their own explorations.

To this end, his model is instead a 'genealogy' of Christian sexual ethics theoretically indebted to Foucault. He stakes no claim to neutrality (if indeed such were possible), but rather makes clear that he is writing from the margins, as an 'unrepentant homosexual' (174), with the express aim of provoking readers into 'thinking anew ... about sex' (11). In this he has almost certainly succeeded, although there will no doubt be less widespread consensus regarding some of the particular theses through which he attempts to achieve this more general goal.

There are two main components to Jordan's book. In the central chapters of the text (Chapters 2–5), he presents his genealogy of Christian sexual ethics. This consists in a detailed critical analysis of historical treatments of Scriptural interpretation; celibacy as an ideal; sex in marriage; and Christian attitudes and responses to 'unnatural' sex (which, as Jordan pointedly remarks, has 'included, in one author or another, every erotic or quasi-erotic act that can be performed by human bodies except penile-vaginal intercourse between two partners who are not primarily seeking pleasure and who do not intend to prevent conception' (78)). This genealogy is framed by discussion and analysis, in the opening and closing chapters (1, 6 and 7), of Jordan's wider topic of concern: a critical study of the status of such discourses within and beyond Christian theology.

It is this dimension of Jordan's work which raises the most pointed philosophical issues. His approach is situated firmly within the post-modern tradition. His first task, in his introductory chapter, is to castigate Christian ethics for its principal 'vices', which he diagnoses as the misguided quest for an ethics which will provide 'the obligatory answer' and 'timeless science' (7–8). His genealogy is thus presented as a corrective to this tendency, proffering an avowedly historicist approach which resists reduction to 'single problems admitting of single solutions' (11). In keeping with this stance (and perhaps frustratingly for philosophical or theological dogmatists), he refuses to offer definitive resolutions of the various debates which he charts during the course of his study—such as (for example) the vexed relations between theology, philosophy and science; or sex and gender (Chapter 1). (The extent to which he succeeds in maintaining this principled non-dogmatic position, in particular when considering the relations between Church and State in Chapters 6 and 7, is an issue to which I shall return.)

Taking his cue from Foucault, Jordan offers instead diagnoses of the varying influences on, and of, theological attitudes to sex. He draws attention to the paucity of Biblical treatments of sexual ethics—remarking pithily, for example, that Jesus' injunction to 'Make yourselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God' (cf. Matthew 19:11–12) 'is not a large foundation on which to build an ethic of sexual behaviour' (43). (It is noticeable—but perhaps fitting for a 'genealogist'—that Jordan follows the standard theological trend of largely neglecting the potential significance of the erotic lyrics of 'Song of Songs'; it does not even feature in his index of Biblical references.) His thesis is that this Biblical silence has prompted the Christian Church to steer an uneasy course between comparable silence on sexual topics, and an almost obsessive classification of unacceptable and acceptable sexual behaviours in order to enable the 'policing' of sexual sins.

Much of what Jordan has to say on this topic—for example, regarding the techniques of surveillance and confession whereby theologians compiled and then enforced their sexual categories and judge-

ments—will be familiar to readers of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. So too, indeed, will be his conclusion (presented as novel to the theological debate) that this delicate balancing act between sexual speech and silence moved Christian authorities to take refuge in the construction of 'sexual (sin-)identities', which performed the dual function of 'labelling' individuals according to their sexual proclivities, whilst affording the Church the luxury of vagueness about the specific activities involved. This classification and regulation of individuals in accordance with sexual identities, to which they are expected (and encouraged?) to conform, is entirely in keeping with Foucault's thesis of the complex and multiple links between sexuality and (bio)power.

Indeed, in the closing chapters of the book it is precisely these interactions between sexuality and power which are the focus of Jordan's most radical considerations and his most philosophically ambitious contributions. Here, he approvingly cites Foucault's account of the 'secularization' of sex, albeit a 'secularization' which grants sex the status of a parable, representative of 'a truth about our present situation' (135), rather than concerned with historical veracity. According to this account, the Church, having once created a discourse of sex, has now ceded authority over its regulation to the bureaucracies of state and medical science. Jordan then argues that: 'If what was originally distinctive about Christian teaching on sex was the nature of the power that it exerted over sex [as Foucault suggests], a change in power will make for the deepest sort of change in Christian sexual ethics' (136).

What are the potential implications of this power shift? Jordan argues that this loss of power by the Church has led to a loss of "voice" (144) or of the authoritative status of its traditional discourse on sex, presenting it with new challenges and opportunities in framing a relevant discourse of sexual ethics. Theologians, he claims, 'no longer speak as officers of Christendom; they ought not to speak as delegates of bio-power' (138). Rather than seeking to reclaim its previous authority, theology should seek a 'different voice' from which to put in question the universalizing ambitions of bio-power's (secularized version of its own

traditional) discourse on sex. Jordan closes with two radical suggestions. First, theology is not yet in a position to offer a sexual ethics; it first needs to develop openness to those voices (female, homosexual, unmarried but non-celibate...) which have traditionally been marginalized in Christian sexual debate. Only in this way will the Church be able to continue its spiritual growth in this regard (152–4).

Second, theology needs to develop a new discourse of sex, to escape from the negatively value-laden terminology of the current debate. A positive paradigm can be drawn from theological discourse about prayer—which ‘is what our erotic capacity prepares us for’ (166). In this particularly provocative section (163–70), Jordan draws an extended comparison between the erotic pleasures of prayer and sex, and argues that this should be developed insofar as ‘pleasure can direct us as a moral teacher’ (169). He thus adopts a broadly Aristotelian approach to pleasure as a concomitant, and indicator, of human moral flourishing.

It is these concluding theses which raise the most philosophical challenges. It is perhaps uncharitable to denounce Jordan for failing to provide a thorough defence of notions which he presents as sketches for potential exploration rather than as authoritative ‘solutions’ (the very concept of which he would in any case reject). Nonetheless, he does perhaps make light of the difficulties that are thereby raised. Jordan seems, for example, to regard the endorsement of an Aristotelian approach to the relation between morality and pleasure as unproblematic. (He adopts this stance in contradistinction to a catalogue of ‘calumnies against pleasure’ (157–63), a catalogue which includes a somewhat simplistic rendition of the common (mis-)interpretation of (Kantian) morality as intrinsically opposed to pleasure. But I shall not re-ignite this tired debate; as Jordan himself acknowledges, ‘much more could be said ... much more should be said, but not here’ (162).) However, this underplays the extent to which his positive teleological account is in tension with his own previous critique of traditional theologians’ appeal to ‘natural law’ as a basis for condemnation of ‘unnatural’ sex (Chapter 4). The defence which he offers in this section against the objection that ‘pleas-

urable’ does not in fact always equate with ‘moral’ rests on an appeal to a distinction between the actual world and the ‘original created order’ (163). But this is remarkably reminiscent of the view which he critiques just a few pages earlier. There he points out that one can salvage ‘natural law’ arguments from inconvenient facts via an appeal to the Fall’s distortion of divine creation, but only at the expense of forfeiting any claim to make reliable inferences from the actual world to divine intention (150). It seems clear that much work remains to be done to reconcile these aspects of Jordan’s position, and to clarify and defend his thesis of pleasure as moral guide.

Jordan also faces the more general, and classically postmodern, difficulty of how to situate his own theory within a framework which dismisses ‘universal reason’ as a ‘fantasy—and a dangerous one’ (22). On the face of it, this is not a problem, as Jordan explicitly recommends that Christian sexual ethics should seek a ‘different voice’ to undercut the universalizing ambitions of traditional discourse: ‘Revelation teaches in ways that bureaucracy cannot. That is the best hope for Christian speeches about sex’ (172). However, this presents a challenging tightrope for theology to walk, and the difficulties of keeping this balance can be sensed throughout Jordan’s book. On the one hand, he rejects the arrogance of those who aspired to ‘build Christendom’; on the other, he wishes to claim some authority for this view of such an ambition as (objectively?) misguided. He aims to make space for ‘different’ voices, but in order to do so must aim to demonstrate that the traditional discourse is ‘wrong’ (that it is based, for example, on a ‘misreading or overreading’ of the Scriptures). At one point, he corrects a common reading of Romans 1 via appeal to Paul’s intentions in writing the epistle (35–6); a dubious argument for a committed postmodernist.

This is far from suggesting, however, that Jordan’s project is without hope or merit. On the contrary, his account is in general a commendable exemplar of the ways in which the postmodern approach can fruitfully exploit such tensions to generate significant insights, and

provides a thought-provoking challenge to all ethicists (theological or secular) who aspire to offer an account of 'the ethics of sex'.

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***Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God***

Marilyn McCord Adams, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999

h/b £31.50 0 8014 3611 7; p/b £11.50 0 8014 8686 6

In this elegantly written book, Adams is reflecting on the history of philosophical discussion of evil since Mackie's classic article in 1955, 'Evil and Omnipotence'. Mackie's contention that theism is positively irrational given the logical incompatibility of the existence of evil alongside an omniscient, omnipotent and all-good God, effectively sets the parameters of the debate to date. Adams offers not an historical review, but an analysis of the structure of the problems posed, particularly for Christianity, by the incidence of evil.

For Adams, the debate has become 'bogged down, somehow stymied'. None of the 'major responses ... seemed to satisfy all the way down' (3), due largely to a focus on 'restricted standard theism', to use Rowe's term. The discussion has (a) made no attempt to address the particularities of any tradition; and (b) been too abstract, aiming at generic explanations with no differentiation between evils. As such, it has failed to confront the *worst* of these and their effects for individual persons. Hence Adams invokes *horrendous evils*: primarily disruptive of human personal life, 'they are evils, participation in which—whether as victim or perpetrator—constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could be (given their inclusion in it) a great good to him/her on the whole' (203; cf. 26). In a real sense, Adams takes up these concerns rather differently from most philosophers of religion.

Her departure point is actual lived experience of suffering: as she has observed elsewhere, the AIDS epidemic drove her to seek for something to say about God and evil that she felt she could stand in the pulpit and honestly speak.

Adams' engagement with Plantinga, Hick and Swinburne finds overzealous their metalevel discourse, which perpetuates the gulf fixed between theory and practice. As they would admit, 'their solutions to the problem of evil would be unfeeling, cold and abstract comfort at best' (188) and so do not speak to human beings in their suffering. But—embracing the concerns of traditional theodicy—as both analytic philosopher and ordained woman priest, Adams' intention is 'to chart a *via media* that rejects any dichotomizing of philosophical reflection on horrors ... and *praxis* that copes with them' (186). She rejects Liberationists' perspectives on *praxis* because their prioritization of sociological analysis over metaphysics leads them to stress both collective suffering over individual suffering and group social action over Divine agency. Her central thesis holds that 'horrendous evils require defeat by nothing less than the goodness of God' (155).

Theoretically, Adams draws a distinction between abstract and concrete logical problems, focusing on the concrete: on types and distribution of evil in the *actual* world. Her approach to compossibility problems addresses the issue of how God can make good on horrors both within the world, and within the horror-participant's life. Adams' claim to practical relevance is her focus on the positive meaning of *individual* lives and on the substantial material always already available within the Christian tradition: 'horrendous evils can be defeated by the Goodness of God within the framework of the individual participant's life and ... Christian belief contains many resources with which to explain how this can be so' (208).

Methodologically, Adams makes particular moves. She refuses to pay 'horrors the compliment of indefeasibility' (189): the reduction of dysteleological evil to merely *prima facie* evil that contributes ultimately to a higher value in the world, and hence is non-defeasible by cosmic

considerations. 'That God would permit some to participate in horrors in order that others might profit from a better soul-making environment seems a poor defense of Divine *goodness to the participants*' (52). She emphasizes *defeat* of evil rather than its *justification*, employing Chisholm's distinction between balancing-off and defeat. Divine goodness to persons is about relationship with God, in which the Holy Spirit enables personal development and discipleship: a relationship not to be reduced to a balance sheet.

Via a discussion of Biblical imagery, Otto, and Douglas (Chapter 5), Adams invokes a 'metaphysical size-gap' between God and persons. She employs this incommensurability—God's holiness/creaturely uncleanness—to establish Divine agency in defeating horrendous evils, for 'horrors smash Humpty Dumpty so badly that only God can put him back together again' (205). Essentially, her proposal marks the difference between soteriology and theodicy. More traditional accounts of theodicy all too readily reduce the problem to a matter of morality. She offers soteriology: '[N]o matter how badly humans fail to function, God can fill ... No matter what mess we make, God can clean it up .... In the Realm of God, the worst that we can suffer, be or do, is not finally ruinous because God invents a new organisational grid ...' (102).

There is something distinctly satisfying theologically about this book. Adams demonstrates the hollowness, irrelevance even, of much theodical discourse. Her proposal—the hope that even horrors could be given a dimension of positive meaning' (203)—may work for particular persons in their suffering: those in some relationship with God. But the limited scope of its application is obvious: how can the suffering of starving babies and of those in 'natural' disasters be made good such that it offers positive meaning within the sufferers' life-time? (Like traditional theodicies, Adams must, and does, offer an eschatological account: '[E]ventually, cognitive and emotional scales will fall and everyone will recognise the omnipresent tender loving care of God!' (105)) How is God good to created *individual* persons? Importantly, Adams raises the right questions, and attempts an 'unrestricted (non-standard) theistic'

response: a theological response grounded in scripture and the tradition of Christian reflection.

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**Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender Challenges in Contemporary Theology**

Sarah Coakley, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002

h/b £50.00 0 631 20735 X; p/b £14.99 0 631 20736 8.

This book brings together nine essays previously published between 1996 and 2002—a useful collection not least because it demonstrates a coherence unusual in many books of this kind. Coakley's central question is whether the submission of the creature to God is an essentially problematic aspect of Christianity, as feminists sometimes suggest, or a vital and positive feature. Holding the latter view, Coakley searches for ways in which submission to God may be expressed and practised without being liable to distortion and abuse. She examines these issues in the light of recent secular (feminist and non-feminist) accounts of power, steering a path between the simplistic identification of power with political (e.g. ecclesiastical) domination on the one hand, and the anarchic consequences of some postmodern theories of power on the other. Instead, whilst she emphatically recognizes the abuses of power which have led to the oppression of women, Coakley argues that the complexity of power is such that very few of us entirely lack responsibility. Unfashionable though it may be to say so, she reminds us (with a conscious echo of late Foucault) that 'whilst institutions may indeed 'discipline' us (for good or ill), we also have the power to discipline ourselves' (xvii).

Her central question is also posed against the background of developments in theology, particularly the idea of divine self-limitation. This concept has been proposed by various theologians and

philosophers of religion both as a solution to the problem of how the infinite God could have become incarnate, and also as an explanation of the existence of evil in the world. Consequently, 'rather than deflecting human weakness, this trend has embraced it—even into the trinitarian heart of God. Submission has been paradoxically identified with divine "power"' (xiv–xv). When current culture shows a continuing fear of all forms of dependence and vulnerability—whilst despairing of the possibility of ridding them from the world—it seems self-defeating of theology to embrace them, as if that were a solution to their prevalence. Coakley identifies the tactic of divinizing, and thus adulating, vulnerability as a specifically male strategy, which causes acute problems for feminist theology: 'such a strategy ... merely reinstates, in legitimised doctrinal form, the sexual, physical and emotional abuse that feminism seeks to expose. An abused God merely legitimates abuse' (xv).

Coakley's aim is best summarized by herself: 'at the heart of the book is an insistence that the apparently forced choice between dependent 'vulnerability' and liberative 'power' is a false one. But the terms of the debate—the different possible meanings of 'power' and 'submission' (whether human or divine), and their semantic cultural admixtures—are what are crucially at stake' (xv). Her method is to scrutinize people's arguments, to clarify what precisely is at issue in each case (especially when opponents are jousting at mirages of each other), and to find room for positions which mediate between an apparently restricted range of alternatives.

A particularly good example of this is in her essay on the 'Social' doctrine of the Trinity (Chapter 7). In both feminist and non-feminist debate, defences of this approach to the doctrine of the Trinity tend either towards a 'threefold "individualism"' which stresses each divine person's autonomy, or towards the radical reconstrual of 'persons' as relations, which apparently restricts or denies their autonomy (111). Coakley not only notes that this false dichotomy hinders constructive debate, she also points out that neither account of the divine persons accurately reflects those fourth century Cappadocian writings which are frequently

called on for support. She then proceeds to show, trenchantly and convincingly, 'why Gregory of Nyssa is not a "social" Trinitarian' (117–24). Most importantly, she counters the notion (made popular through the writings of John Zizioulas) that Gregory 'starts with' the three persons, or prioritizes them over the one being of God. In line with this she insists on a more subtle interpretation of Gregory's (in)famous analogy of three men. She is alive to the possibility that Gregory's Platonism allowed him to think of 'humanity' as more real than, or logically prior to, the 'three men' (with the consequence that the godhead is more real/logically prior to the three persons). Furthermore, she recognizes that the 'three men' example acts as a significant *disanalogy*: whereas three men act separately, this is never possible for the three persons of the Godhead. So, despite the conclusions of various modern theologians, the 'three men' should never be used as evidence that Gregory thought of the three divine persons as three independent agents—still less as three separate consciousnesses. (Indeed, she challenges the idea that Gregory thought of personhood in terms of self-consciousness at all.) Furthermore, she argues that an emphasis on the 'three men' analogy does not do justice to Gregory's range of metaphors for the Trinity (a point which concurs with the work of patristic scholars such as R. P. C. Hanson). Many of these stress the indivisibility and unity of the godhead, and even 'a certain fluidity in their boundaries' (121); all have at their heart Gregory's prayerful apophaticism which insists on the ultimate incomprehensibility of the divine being.

Another good example of her ability to cut through tangled arguments is her essay on '*Kenōsis* and subversion' (Chapter 1), which reveals that the disagreement between Daphne Hampson and Rosemary Radford Ruether as to whether *kenōsis* is a destructive concept emerges partly because they have in mind different notions of *kenōsis*. In Ruether's eyes, it is *patriarchy* which is 'emptied out': the incarnation revealed the self-giving humility of God; it did not demand that Christ had to empty himself of some aspects of divinity in order to become humble. (In this interpretation, Coakley finds Ruether close to C. F. D. Moule and J. A.

T. Robinson.) Hampson, on the other hand, appears to believe that *kenōsis* involves a deliberate abdication of power and as such is a dangerous paradigm for women. In a very useful survey, Coakley points out that this view does not, in fact, reflect most New Testament scholars' interpretations of Philippians 2 (most discussion of *kenōsis* refers to this passage), but is directed more at a certain type of early twentieth-century theology. As a result, Ruether's and Hampson's views do not even connect: 'Ruether is promoting a view of *kenōsis* which Hampson does not even consider' (11). Coakley then herself suggests a positive evaluation of *kenōsis*: it is nearer to Ruether than Hampson, but is an original and distinctive defence of the idea, through the model of contemplative prayer. In this practice, vulnerability is neither masochistic nor self-abnegating: thus 'special "self-emptying" is not a negation of self, but the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God' (36).

This important chapter, if left standing on its own, might seem to put too much weight on its necessarily brief study of contemplative prayer. In this book it benefits greatly from the more detailed accounts of prayer given in relation to writers such as Dom John Chapman, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and Gregory Palamas. In these Coakley clarifies her idea of the relation of right 'dependence' on God in prayer (see especially Chapter 3), based on a holistic and unified concept of the praying 'self' (Chapters 4 and 8), and situated in a rich, although complex, Christian tradition. A virtue of Coakley's historically-sensitive approach is that she appreciates the subtleties and confusions of the path of 'tradition'.

Precisely because of this complexity, Coakley is keen that different disciplines should learn from one another, and attempts to bring them together are a running methodological theme of book. In particular, there are frequent pleas that analytic philosophy of religion should attend to feminist questionings (27, Chapter 6 *passim*), and to the Christian theological tradition, both doctrine and practice (85, 111). At the same time, there is the clear implication that much theology and much feminism could benefit from the rigour of the analytic mode. As her

emphasis on the activity of contemplative prayer constantly reminds us, Coakley suggests that 'the "spiritual" and the "philosophical" can find a close unity in practice' (72). Furthermore, Coakley demonstrates that theology and secular feminism have surprising things to learn from each other: for example, the stimulating final chapter (Chapter 9) brings together Gregory of Nyssa's and Judith Butler's thoughts on the theme of the transformation of the body. Although she is frequently hesitant about such comparisons across different eras and cultures, Coakley never stretches her analogies too far. Indeed, not the least achievement of this book—besides its stated aim of elucidating theological notions of power and submission—is Coakley's ability to allow past authors to say what they said without distortion, whilst still allowing them to come into conversation with more recent debate.

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