

INTRODUCTION

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The Changing Faces of Femininity: Religious and Philosophical Perspectives

Reflecting on, or attempting to understand, the feminine and, by extension, the changing faces of femininity, is a complex task. And such an investigation is all the more difficult, not only because of the variety of these 'faces,' but also because it is sometimes not obvious what exactly these changes are, or what femininity itself is.

'Femininity' is not something that admits of an easy and unambiguous description. Perhaps this was not always so; at the beginning of the present century, the association between 'femininity' and 'woman' seems to have been rather close. There we find femininity defined as "appropriate to the female sex; as, in a good sense, modest, graceful, affectionate, confiding; or, in a bad sense, weak, nerveless, timid, pleasure-loving, effeminate" (*Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913) - and as synonymous with "womanly, ladylike, matronly, maidenly, wifely; womanish, effeminate, unmanly" (*Roget's Thesaurus*, 1911).

But this close association has been challenged, and now, two years from the end of the same century, it is clear that, despite its etymological origin, 'femininity' is understood as something distinct from 'woman' - the human female. After all, some males can be described as feminine or effeminate, and some women are said to be 'masculine.' There are even more radical illustrations of this point. Consider the instance of the 'transsexual' or the transgendered person. Here, biology and gender identity do not coincide, and one's 'femininity' (or 'masculinity') is a problem for the person concerned - a problem that she or he wishes to address, and believes can be addressed, through medical (including surgical) procedures. One sees this 'tension' - or, better perhaps, 'realignment' - of biology and gender in some of the world's religions. (In Hinduism, for example, we have Shiva, a deity who incorporates both male and female

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characteristics, and yet who is not female.) Indeed, some argue that the feminine is *opposed* to woman and, in these times, in almost all cultures and civilizations in the world, we find those who raise the question of whether femininity is an obstacle to women - specifically, to their advancement and power.

What, then, is 'femininity'? A variety of answers have been provided to this question, but we can briefly identify some principal responses.

Some see femininity primarily as a set of stereotypes or a set of practices. Thus, as noted above, the feminine is associated with such 'positive' characteristics as compassion, rootedness in concrete experience, sympathy, gentleness, receptivity, sensitivity, cooperativeness, communally-minded, showing a respect for nature, nurturing - though it is also associated with 'negative' traits such as dependence, weakness, passivity, sentimentality, irrationality, subjectivity, and so on. It has, perhaps obviously, been seen as that which is 'other' than the masculine - i.e., in contrast with the 'male' qualities of independence, competitiveness, aggressiveness, rationality, and objectivity. As a set of stereotypes and practices, then, 'femininity' is held to be a 'social status' - a social construction and a convention or way of seeing woman that has, at best, a minor biological basis (see Naomi Scheman, *Engenderings: constructions of knowledge, authority, and privilege*, [New York: Routledge, 1993]). There is; it is claimed, nothing in women, or in nature, that shows that these characteristics or traits are essential to women and, as stereotypes, they ought to be challenged and, ultimately, freed from association with either sex.

Others understand 'femininity' in quite a different way - as something that is real, 'natural,' not a matter of convention, and an objective feature of being or beings.

For example, some see it as involving traits that tend to reflect matters of biology distinctive of women. (See, here, the work of St Teresa Benedicta - the recently canonised Catholic philosopher and religious thinker, Edith Stein - and particularly her *Essays on Woman* [ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven; trans. Freda Mary Oben. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987]). Female lived experience

leads to propensities or orientations particular to women - and this is recognised by some non-feminists and feminists alike as reflecting an 'ethic of care' (see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982]). Traits of sensitivity, sympathy or compassion, cooperativeness or communal-mindedness, are seen to be a product or development of the intimate relation between women and their reproductive biology. Examples of women who model these traits of 'femininity' are found in Scripture and religious tradition - Ruth, in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus' mother, Mary, and Jesus' disciple, Martha. (Indeed, for Christians and, particularly, Catholics, Mary is a model of both 'woman' and of 'femininity.') There is, in short, no arbitrariness in relating 'the feminine' and 'woman.' And, although femininity reflects features distinctive of women's being, such accounts often add that 'the feminine' is also 'half' of a pair, that both 'halves' depend on something prior - 'humanity' - and that, without reference to these, femininity itself cannot be understood. Thus, there is no basic opposition between the feminine and the masculine or the feminine and the human.

Others see 'femininity' as an objective feature of being, and as something not conventional, but primarily as a characteristic of the sacred or the divine, and only then, by extension, of the human. One finds many examples of this: the feminine principle ("the mysterious female") in Taoism, the rivers as goddesses in Indian religions (e.g., Ganga Mata - Mother Ganges), the standard - if not the perfection--of 'femininity' found in classical Greece with its goddess of love, Aphrodite (and, in classical Rome, with Venus), and the 'eternal feminine' or Sophia - the feminine soul of the world - in the work of the Russian philosopher- mystic Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900). 'Femininity,' here, is a cosmic principle or an 'archetype' rather than a characteristic or a stereotype.

A particularly striking example of the feminine archetype or the eternal feminine as a principle relevant to religion is to be seen in the work of the philosopher-poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In Goethe's version of the Faust story, as Faust is carried upward to salvation, the final words - intoned by the 'mystical chorus' - are:

All that is perishable/ Is but a likeness. / The unattainable / Here
is accomplished. / The indescribable - / Here it is done: / The
Eternal Feminine / Draws us on.

This image of the 'eternal feminine' here is that of the cosmic force of love and of a final cause and, as such, is an expression of the divine. This feminine principle promises or provides 'a resting place' - a '*terminus ad quem*' - in contrast to the frenetic activity that characterises this world. And one finds *other* reflections of the archetype of femininity in music (in Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*, influenced by Goethe), in art (e.g., Paul Cézanne's *The Eternal Feminine (The Triumph of Women)*, 1877), in modern psychology, in such thinkers as Carl Jung, and even in Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 short story, "Aparichita."

Clearly, then, there are many answers to the question of what femininity is, and one cannot deny that there are different ways - and, in our time, new ways - of representing the range of qualities, characteristics, and images associated with femininity.

Still, 'the changing faces of femininity' may seem, at first inspection, a primarily sociological and psychological issue. It is at least true that much of the recent discussion of what 'femininity' is, is found in the increasingly - popular fields of the sociology and psychology of gender. A concern with 'femininity' - and with 'woman' - is also to be found in disciplines bearing on women's self-understanding and their involvement in the public sphere. This is undoubtedly the consequence of the greater participation of women in politics, business, the sciences, and the professions, where their presence and influence have served to challenge many of the traditional notions associated with 'woman.' It is also a product of the fact that, in literature around the world, and especially since the late 19th century, the nature and character of 'woman' have been explored and reexplored, usually through women's autobiography and fiction.

Upon some reflection, however, the theme of 'the changing faces of femininity' can be seen, at root, as not just attesting to the preceding phenomena, but also raising a matter of theoretical - and, particularly, philosophical and religious - interest. While this theme invites discussion of the ways in which such changes have happened,

and explanations of how and why they have occurred, it also requires us to *reconsider* what 'femininity' is, what it means to speak of its 'changing faces,' and what implications this might have both for human self-understanding and for religious faith and practice.

Questions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' - or, more broadly, of gender - have been of significant concern in contemporary philosophy, for some have argued that philosophy itself is 'gendered' - that it represents a distinctively male way of thinking. Indeed, these questions affect not only epistemology, but metaphysics and ethics. Thus, 'femininity' implies certain principles - some have argued, doubtful principles - about the being of women. Moreover, 'the feminine' is not just a descriptive predicate; it also has a normative character. 'Femininity' suggests a standard of behaviour that all people - women and men alike - ought to respect, and many hold that it gives rise to a distinctively feminine ethic - an ethic of care. In light of this, as the 'faces' of femininity - the ways in which femininity is presented - change, one is naturally drawn to ask how this might or should have an impact on philosophical method, the practice of philosophy, and the philosophical interpretation of the world. Of course, philosophy is also interested in understanding the notions of 'femininity' and of 'gender' themselves - e.g., what it means to describe something as 'feminine,' what ontological status 'femininity' has, and whether the concept of 'femininity' itself is coherent or useful. Philosophy, then, clearly has an important and fundamental role not only in responding to, but in drawing out and analysing, the changing faces of femininity.

As we have seen above, questions of femininity and gender also have a religious dimension. The theme of the changing faces of femininity calls to mind the place - the distinctive place - of the feminine within theologies (e.g., systematic and moral theologies), within religious practice and spirituality, and within religious communities, and how that place has changed, or is changing. It also brings to mind the issue of the presence of the feminine within the divine, especially how we know and attempt to express it. For example, given that our knowledge of the divine is so often analogical to our knowledge of what is human, our understanding of femininity affects our understanding of what the divine is. And, as femininity or

its faces *change* so, presumably, will our understanding of divinity. Moreover, as noted earlier, the feminine is itself sometimes considered to be a principle within religion. Recall the examples of what has been called "feminine sacrality" - the image of the feminine as an element that is eternal or divine. This is something that we find in a variety of cultures, both ancient and modern. And, further, since religion is not (just) about what is transcendent but also about the world in which believers live, it is clear that 'femininity,' as a phenomenon of the world, must be addressed within religion. Indeed, believers and non-believers alike are concerned with how religions see and value femininity. Many have claimed that, from the practices of the major world religions, it appears that the value of femininity is considered to be rather doubtful or ambiguous. Yet others have noted that there is, at least, an increasing recognition of its importance. Thus we have the example of the recent Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988), in which the topic of 'femininity' is explored, and wherein one finds the articulation of the existence of a peculiar feminine "genius" (art. 30 and 31) and of woman's distinctive feminine dignity.

These brief remarks give us some idea of the complexity of the task of expressing clearly, and coming to understand, the faces of femininity and the philosophical and religious concerns they give rise to. Since this collection of essays is concerned not only with religious and philosophical perspectives on femininity, but particularly with its 'changing faces,' we are to keep in mind that there is a dynamism in femininity which religion and philosophy also have to address. Yet what this dynamism requires us to conclude cannot, it seems, be specified in advance. And so, even though philosophical and religious reflection enables ideas of 'femininity' and the different faces of femininity to be brought out more into the open, one must acknowledge that there is no set or obvious way in which philosophy and religion might or must respond as these faces change.

The theme uniting the essays of this issue of the Journal asserts that there have been, and are today, changes in the 'faces of femininity.' As the papers in this volume illustrate, there is much debate on which, if any, of these views of femininity allows us the most insight into this issue. Nevertheless, many of these 'faces' are

compatible with one another. For example, the characteristics enumerated in some of the views of the feminine - those of love, caring, nonviolence, and compassion - are not impotent ones. Femininity does not exclude having power or using it, and power has often been employed by women (as classical models suggest), at least in an 'occult' way - indirectly, rather than directly. And, even where these different 'faces' may seem to conflict, one might argue that some - the positive - aspects of the feminine are more comprehensive than others. But regardless of the stand one takes on this point, these accounts of femininity - be it understood as a set of social practices or as a series of traits of objective being - provide a useful reminder of the different 'faces' that 'femininity' can have.

Moreover, while femininity has different and 'changing' faces, it does not follow that femininity need be something relative, or arbitrary, or purely conventional, or a social construct. And by recognising the diverse presentations of the feminine, and by being open to the changes within it, the result is not relativism or scepticism. The fact of the changing faces of femininity does not mean, then, that there is nothing - no reality - called 'femininity.' Neither does it mean that, given that these changes continue, it is not worth the effort to investigate or to attempt to describe what femininity is. Nor should it be a matter of concern that these changing faces seem to be innumerable, since what it is they represent, in the human, in nature, or in the divine, is itself arguably inexhaustible.

Furthermore, although the notion of femininity may seem to be beyond analysis and, hence, problematic because of its changing faces, the fact that there is a diversity of understanding does not exclude the possibility of a progress in understanding. While some are doubtful whether such progress can take place, philosophers like Jacques Maritain would argue that, through a 'connatural knowing' by human persons - women and men alike - of the most basic and elemental inclinations of their being, we progressively come to understand ourselves, and that this (as Maritain believes) will lead to moral progress. Attentiveness to these changing faces, then, not only enables us to become more aware of the feminine itself; it allows a deeper understanding of the masculine, of the human, of 'the good,' and, as appropriate, of whatever principle underlies them all.

Admittedly, the decision to continue speaking of 'femininity' as something distinct from its 'changing faces' is not without its dangers, and the challenge to those who wish to retain a model of femininity is to avoid allowing it to be reduced to stereotypes and practices, whereby appeals to 'being feminine' are used illegitimately to limit women, rather than to enable them to contribute to the understanding of femininity and, by extension, of the human and the divine.

The papers in this volume provide us with an appreciation of the multiplicity of, and the dynamism in, the faces of 'the feminine.' While, certainly, more can be said - for example, concerning many of the other 'faces' of the feminine that we encounter - the authors of these essays help us to see how philosophy and religion bear on, and contribute to, an understanding of the changing faces of femininity. As noted earlier, to speak of the 'changing' faces of femininity is to recognize that these faces not only have changed, but continue to change and, consequently, it seems clear that the response of religion and philosophy is itself something that must be, of its very nature, open-ended. And it is undoubtedly true that as philosophers and scholars of religion see and reflect on the changes in the faces of femininity, they will not only acquire new insights into 'the feminine,' the human and the divine, but they will hear a call to rethink their understanding of their own disciplines.

