

Women and the Human Paradigm: An Exploration of Gender Discrimination

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The contemporary debate about the place and role of women in the Church is proving to be a painful and difficult business. Language itself contributes to the problems in the sense that certain tacit assumptions—overwhelmingly negative about women—are embedded deep in our talk about human persons. The answer is not to be found simply in tinkering with non-sexist language. The practical difficulties facing women are compounded by the fact that the language in which the discussion is conducted depends for its meaning on gender images that are implicitly discriminatory. The clue to this problem is to be found in certain key assumptions about the nature of human persons.

The experience of intra-human discrimination has certain common elements. Those discriminated against are in one way or another denied rights accorded to other human beings, their needs are subordinated to those of others, and their behaviour tends to be interpreted in causal rather than psychological terms. What is characteristic about this experience is that it involves a refusal to treat those discriminated against as persons in the full sense of that term, for to recognize someone as a person is precisely to accord them certain rights, to take note of their needs, and to see them as subjects whose experience can only be adequately explained in terms of psychology. In this essay we shall attempt to uncover those features of our talk about persons that give rise to the possibility of discrimination and following this we shall consider the particular difficulties facing women.

It has been customary for philosophers when analysing the concept of a person to begin by listing the kinds of things we say about persons. They have, for example, drawn our attention to the fact that persons are generally said to be capable of purposive action, that they can reflect and exercise a degree of reason, and that as a consequence they can be held responsible for their decisions and actions. In his seminal book *Individuals* P.F. Strawson criticises this way of approaching the question.¹ He maintains that the concept of a person is logically primitive and that it cannot be analysed in terms of definitive criteria. Strawson insists that the applicability of person language to anything presupposes that the subject involved is already judged to be a person.

There is a close connection in the human mind between the concept of a person and that of a human being. However, while there is an important,

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indeed decisive, conceptual relationship between these two terms, there are good grounds for drawing a distinction between them. We use many nouns when talking about members of the human race: human being, man, woman, etc. The characteristic feature of all these nouns is that they function as names for a distinctive thing like cat, dog, bitch, etc. Thus, unlike the term 'person', which has no definitive criteria, the expression 'human being' is a term with well-established criteria of application. We can illustrate the distinction between these two terms by noting two exceptional cases: first, the possibility of non-human persons, and, secondly, instances where human beings are themselves held to be non-persons. In our own Judaeo-Christian tradition God is held to be a person, as are angels, but neither God nor angels are held to be human beings. There is also a question mark in some people's minds as to whether or not very small babies and adults in a state of deep coma are persons in the full sense of the term. These examples obviously deserve fuller treatment but they entitle us at the very least to question the assumption that the term 'person' is simply another name for human beings.

Cases of human beings who are not normally classified as persons are particularly illuminating. Why is it that we are inclined to deny the term 'person' to very young babies and comatose adults? Part of the reason has to be that while one does not have to do anything in order to earn the title 'human being'—one simply has to be born of a human mother—this is not the case with persons. Persons are not identified in terms of biological origins but by other, less tangible, qualities. These two cases present difficulties precisely because these qualities are missing. Persons are said, amongst other things, to be self-conscious agents. In the case of the severely comatose adult there is a total absence of any purposive behaviour, and in the case of the young baby, while there is plenty of activity, there is little or no reason to talk in terms of self-conscious agency. In both cases we are inclined to explain behaviour in causal terms and avoid the use of psychological and personal predicates.

Although terms such as 'human being', 'man', or 'woman' function as names or labels for certain clearly defined things, the term 'person' falls into a different category. 'Person' is not a name for a distinctive kind of thing, like 'apple', 'cow', or 'pen', rather it acts as a title that we bestow upon something in the appropriate circumstances, like 'priest' or 'teacher'. The term 'human being' can be used both as a description of fact, and in a normative sense, as in expressions such as 'He's only human', but 'person' is an entirely normative and open-ended expression.

Even though the terms 'human being' and 'person' are logically distinct, they are nonetheless conceptually linked because we take human beings to be the paradigm of what it is to be a person. Cases such as the very young baby and the comatose adult serve to underline this point for they are difficult cases precisely because they are examples where the paradigm does not quite fit. Although there are no definitive criteria for

the application of the title 'person' we normally and reasonably apply this title to anything that exhibits behavioural features in common with humans. However, while we may reasonably ascribe person status to anything that exhibits human characteristics, since such status is a presupposition for ascribing personal predicates and not a condition, there are no grounds on which we can disprove anyone who withholds it. It would appear that while observed behaviour provides us with grounds for assigning person status, these grounds do not conclusively entail such status. Ultimately person status rests on a decision and judgement that such grounds are taken as adequate.

It is now clear that what gives rise to the possibility of intra-human discrimination on grounds such as race, religion, ethnic origin, or gender is the very open-endedness of the concept of a person, together with the normative features of the related term 'human being'. Since the use of personal categories of interpretation and explanation rests upon a normative decision rather than on evidence it is very difficult to challenge someone's refusal to apply the normal human paradigm. As Strawson has pointed out, the decision about whether a subject is to be classed as a person is not an empirical judgement based on evidence, but rather a judgement about what the evidence is and how it is to be understood and interpreted. However, while there is no logically conclusive way of faulting a refusal to treat certain groups of human beings as persons, it can be pointed out that such an attitude involves an essential element of self-deception. Language about persons rests upon certain assumptions, one of the most important of which is that human beings are taken to be the paradigm of what it is to be a person. Hence in order to deny full-person status to another group of human beings the discriminator has to resort to certain mental tricks, making use of the normal paradigm in general, and at the same time withholding it in cases where it clearly fits.

Our brief analysis of discrimination might suggest that the difficulties facing women could be solved by pointing out that the human paradigm applies to them as much as to men. At one level this is of course true, but the problem is more complex than that. The problem for women lies not so much in the misuse of the human paradigm as in the paradigm itself. Our language and beliefs about human identity have their roots in a tradition that associates Reason and the Mind (essential qualities of persons) with male images, and the realm of the sense and the body with female images.² There is, for example, the age-old association between Nature and the feminine. Nature is referred to as 'Mother' and man is seen as an intelligent agent pitted against her potentially destructive forces. Man's battle with nature is equated with 'the battle of the sexes'. The masculine 'Spirit' is in a perpetual struggle with the unpredictable forces of feminine 'Nature'. In our own century Sigmund Freud, who saw women as 'mutilated men', associated masculinity with culture and femininity with sexuality. He wrote:

Women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of civilization has become more and more men's business; it confronts them with ever harder tasks, compels them to sublimations of instincts which women are not easily able to achieve ... Woman finds herself ... forced into the background by the claims of culture and she adopts an inimical attitude towards it.³

Femininity is associated with all that is alien to culture and the life of reason. It is this bias in our language about human identity that lies at the root of the discrimination that denies women their full status as persons, and it is to this that we now turn.

As well as describing human beings as male and female we also talk in a much looser way about masculinity and femininity. The former distinction has certain clearly defined empirical criteria of application, but the latter category has something of the open-ended texture associated with the concept of a person. While it is generally clear whether or not someone is classifiable as male or female in the biological sense, it remains very much open to question whether or not a particular attitude or disposition should be classified as masculine or feminine. There are no clear and unequivocal criteria by which we can make such a distinction.

Gender in this wider sense plays an important, if not decisive, role in shaping human life and experience. Human aspirations and life-styles are to a large extent shaped by people's conception of gender and by their identification with one pole of sexual identity or the other. Even a cursory examination of the concepts of masculinity and femininity reveals that femininity is generally defined by its relation to masculinity. This reflects a structure or dominance built into our language and beliefs which serves to place femininity in a position of inferiority.⁴ As Genevieve Lloyd puts it: 'Our ideas and ideals of maleness and femaleness have been formed within structures of dominance—of superiority and inferiority, "norms" and "difference", "positive" and "negative", the "essential" and the "complementary".'⁵ Femininity according to Lloyd, is understood as a departure from the underlying norm of masculinity. It is the masculine that is the starting point and femininity is judged only insofar as it differs from this.

This point cannot be lightly dismissed. The Christian West has been greatly influenced by Greek and Latin philosophy, particularly the works of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom saw femininity as an inferior sphere of existence. Aristotle believed that masculinity represented the true perfection of humanity, for '... the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort', and, 'we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity ...'⁶ This belief is reflected in the early Christian tradition in thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, both of whom maintained that spiritual and moral perfection could be represented metaphorically as 'becoming male'. While insisting that the human soul is

destined for asexual perfection, they paradoxically represent this state in exclusively masculine terms. The implication is clear, namely that femininity is at best a derivation from the 'ideal' of masculinity.⁷ Such ideas now seem patently absurd but one can still hear their echo in contemporary culture. Karl Barth, while maintaining the equality of men and women, nonetheless insisted that women can only find their human fulfilment in willing and joyful subordination to men. Maturity for a woman, Barth insists, is measured by the extent of her submission to the order of creation.⁸ Women still find that their access to full human recognition depends in part upon them identifying with the opposing pole of masculine identity. The survival of the language of subordination, albeit in a somewhat attenuated form, contains more than the hint of a suggestion that the feminine only finds its true fulfilment in relation to a 'superior' masculine image. Indeed Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, argues that women can only find their freedom in the total rejection of all that our history and culture has made of the concept of femininity.⁹ This radical claim has not of course gone unchallenged, but one cannot escape from the conclusion that femininity is somehow conceived as a second-class form of human identity.¹⁰ Even the liberal attitude which speaks in terms of feminine 'complementarity' betrays a subtle dependance on the underlying structure of dominance.

This gender polarity which places femininity in a state of conceptual disadvantage has obvious implications for our understanding of women as persons. As Lloyd points out, 'The male-female distinction itself has operated not as a straightforwardly descriptive principle of classification, but as an expression of values'.¹¹ Not only is femininity treated as a departure from a masculine norm, but its position of implied inferiority works effectively to distance the feminine from all that is valued in human life—action, reason, moral responsibility—in short, all that is said to characterise human beings as persons. The normative judgement implied by the polarity of gender images inevitably clashes with the normative judgement associated with the ascription of person status.

It is not difficult to find examples of the framework of gender reference in operation. In an interview printed in the *Sunday Times* dated 6 September 1987, the Bishop of London, when discussing the ordination of women, commented 'Symbolically it is the male who takes the initiative and the female who receives'. This is not an isolated belief. In the opening chapter of her book *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality*, Shere Hite presents the answers given by a sample of over 7000 men who responded to her questionnaire about what they regarded as typically 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics.¹² The most common masculine characteristics mentioned included these: being autonomous, independent, self-assured, in control, unafraid, strong, unemotional, and rational; whilst for femininity there were: being loving, supportive, warm, gentle, compassionate, docile, patient, and self-sacrificing. Genevieve Lloyd, in

the book already quoted, *The Man of Reason*, argues convincingly that in our tradition of Western thought masculinity has been identified with the active and reasoning aspects of personal life, while femininity has been defined in terms of passivity, receptivity, and the bodily senses.¹³ This conception of femininity is presented starkly by Philo of Alexandria in his marriage of Greek philosophical models and Jewish Scriptural thought.

The male is more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to causal activity, for the female is incomplete and in subjection and belongs to the category of the passive rather than the active. So too with the two ingredients which constitute our life-principle, the rational and the irrational; the rational which belongs to mind and reason is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of the sense, is of the feminine. Mind belongs to a genus wholly superior to sense as man is to woman.¹⁴

Augustine, writing in the fourth century, rejected the tradition represented by Philo which identified Reason exclusively with masculine images. Women, he insisted, no less than men, share in the 'rational mind' wherein we are made in God's image.¹⁵ However, Augustine was still firmly wedded to the view that the relations between men and women can be used to symbolise the relationship of dominance and subordination within a divided human nature. In *De Trinitate* Augustine used precisely this symbolic tradition in order to explicate the distinction between the mind's control over contingent things and its higher function in the contemplation of eternity.¹⁶ The woman's physical subordination is taken as an apt symbol of the mind's concern for temporal affairs, while man's dominance becomes an image of the mind's contemplative function. The practical functioning of the mind is typologically identified with the figure of Eve in the Genesis story of woman's creation as man's helpmate. Just as woman is created for man, and not vice versa, so the mind's practical functioning is at the service of its higher contemplative function.

And as the twain is one flesh in the case of male and female, so in the mind one nature embraces our intellect and action, our counsel and performance, or our reason and rational appetite, or whatever other more significant terms there may be by which to express them; so that, as it was said of the former, 'And they two shall be in one flesh,' it may be said of these, they two are in one mind.¹⁷

Although Augustine attempted to correct the older gender symbolism, from a conceptual point of view the situation remains much as before. Augustine's symbolic association of the female body with the mind's lower functioning serves to reinforce the association of masculinity with superiority and femininity with inferiority and leaves a question mark over the relation of the latter to Reason. Moreover, since it is through the mind's engagement with temporal things that Reason is tempted to divert

itself from contemplation, female images once more become associated with carnal appetites, thus re-establishing the tradition that identified femininity with images of the bodily senses.

In the twentieth century even the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre betrays his indebtedness to the structure of gender dominance. Towards the end of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre engages in what he calls 'a psychoanalysis of things'.¹⁸ In this analysis the female body is associated with the 'holes' and 'slime' which threaten to overwhelm the free self. The female body is said to signify what must be transcended if genuine subjecthood is to be achieved.

We now see why the structure of dominance can serve to exclude women from the category of persons. It is quite clear that what we have already defined as the category of the personal—action, reason, and the moral life—is associated with masculinity. Progress in personal life from this point of view is only held to be possible for women insofar as they transcend those very features that are said to characterize them as female. This analysis forces us to re-examine our earlier remarks about the role of the human paradigm in the ascription of person status. It is, perhaps, no exaggeration to say that we must now begin to talk about the genderization of the human paradigm. Gender difference has been defined in such a way as to guarantee the virtual exclusion of women from their full status as persons. It is not so much that women have experienced a succession of superficial misogynist attitudes—which they undoubtedly have—but rather that our ideals of personhood have been formulated with male paradigms in mind.

The problem for woman lies not in the *misuse* of the human paradigm but in *the paradigm itself*. Deeply embedded in our ways of thinking and speaking there is a metaphysical assumption about gender which works to exclude women from the category of persons. While political action can do much to ease the barriers restricting the lives of women, this alone can do nothing to tackle the hidden assumptions at work in our language. To insist that women are equal in status as persons, while important as a political statement, misses the conceptual complexities of gender difference. Women cannot easily be accommodated within a conceptual system that is implicitly built upon the predominance of the masculine within the human paradigm. Furthermore, such an attitude simply endorses the assumption that the principle human virtues are those traditionally associated with masculinity. As long as the concept of a person remains tied to its traditional paradigm any affirmation of women's equal right to person status involves the inevitable assumption that women must somehow transcend those character traits normally associated with femininity.

The challenge for the Church, as for society in general, is to face up to the fact that our language is not gender-neutral. The debate about the role of women in the life of the Church is not conducted in terms that are fair

to all the parties involved. Women come to the debate shackled by an intellectual inheritance that loads our language about human persons with images of masculine superiority. The answer is not simply to tinker with non-sexist language but to face up to the full seriousness of the conceptual handicaps that disadvantage women in their struggle for personal identity and freedom.

- 1 P.F. Strawson, *Individuals* (Methuen, London, 1959), pp. 87—116.
- 2 It is important to note here that personal predicates are those implying that something has a conscious, rational, and moral life. This does not mean that bodily/physiological identity and personal identity are two separate and distinct things. But it does mean that there is a conceptual distinction between talk about persons (and consequently about human beings as persons) and talk about bodily identity. To talk about a human being as a person is to invoke a framework of reference and explanation which is distinct from the empirical framework of biology and physiology. Persons may have bodies but when we talk about them as persons we are addressing aspects of experience that cannot be reduced to bodily experience. The identification of the feminine with the bodily senses is therefore an important factor in the conceptual exclusion of women from their full status as persons. To identify their gender with images of the body is effectively to rule them out of the category of persons.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, (Hogarth Press, London, 1930), p.73.
- 4 D. Spender in her book *Man Made Language* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980) argues that language is man made, and that as a consequence 'maleness' pervades language as a whole.
- 5 Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Methuen, London, 1984), p. 103.
- 6 Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* (Heinemann, London, 1943), 728a. 17, p. 103; 775. 15, p. 461.
- 7 For a discussion of this strand in early Christian thinking see Kari Vogt ' "Becoming Male": One Aspect of an Early Christian Anthropology', *Concilium*, 182, December 1985, pp. 72—83.
- 8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 3 part iv, p. 177.
- 9 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972).
- 10 Lloyd, op. cit. pp. 96—107, offers an interesting feminist critique of *The Second Sex*. She notes that in it de Beauvoir is heavily indebted to the Sartrean idea that human fulfilment is to be found in the transcendence of creaturely dependence and immanence. The difficulty, as Lloyd sees it, is that in Sartre the female body is portrayed as the epitome of immanence. As Lloyd comments: '... the ideal of transcendence is, in a more fundamental way than de Beauvoir allows, a male ideal; that it feeds on the exclusion of the feminine'. (p. 101)
- 11 Ibid. p. 103.
- 12 Shere Hite, *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality* (Macdonald, London, 1981).
- 13 There is a growing literature on the subject of gender bias in our models of Rationality. See, for example: L. Blum, 'Kant's and Hegel's Moral Rationalism: A Feminist Perspective', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, XII, 1982, pp. 287—302; G. Lloyd, 'The Man of Reason', *Metaphilosophy*, 10, 1979, pp. 18—37; C. McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982); J. Thomson, 'Women and the High Priests of Reason', *Radical Philosophy*, 34, 1983, pp. 10—14.
- 14 Philo, *Special Laws*, 1, sec. xxxdvii, quoted in G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (1984), p. 27.
- 15 *De Trinitate*, XII, vii, 12.
- 16 *De Trinitate*, XII, iii, 3; see also, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, xi, 15 and xiv, 21.
- 17 *De Trinitate*, XII, iii, 3.
- 18 Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Methuen, London, 1958), pp. 613—614.