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Ethics of the Dark Feminine

The Feminine Face of Science

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What is defined as the qualities of the feminine cannot be reduced to definite traits revealed through our studies of the biology of gender, nor can they be dismissed as an entirely arbitrary social construction. The feminine is just as real and just as difficult to define as the living women we encounter in the course of our daily lives.

Being a woman within the context of a patriarchal society makes it very difficult to achieve an honest and self aware commentary about the state of the feminine, and yet the solution cannot be found by relying upon the “objective” opinions of men. Nor can it be sought in the dogmas or traditions of science or religion, both of which are completely subsumed by the patriarchal value system which is responsible for the denigration of the feminine. Therefore, while I must admit that I am deeply affected by prejudicial attitudes which arise both from the fact of being female and from the conditioning I have undergone as a product of a culture of dominating patriarchy, it must also be admitted that there is no superior resource capable of providing a bias free perspective on the modern state of the feminine.

The experience of the feminine archetype is initially encountered in life through the figure of an individual’s own mother. “Like any other archetype, the mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects... First in importance are the personal mother and grandmother,” (Jung, 1959, p. 81). Personal interactions with the mother color an individual’s understanding of the feminine in a deep and profound way, determining the degree to which one is capable of having a healthy relationship with the feminine archetype.

The fact of patriarchy cannot be ignored in considering these early impressions of femininity and masculinity. My childhood experiences were entirely dominated by notions of the ideal feminine as defined by male culture and specifically my father. My father, mother and many subtle cultural forces all worked together in teaching me an ideal of unachievable perfection. I learned a somewhat contradictory set of qualities that required absolute mastery and precise execution in order to receive the praise that I so desperately craved. It was necessary to be in all ways meek, humble and submissive, but also to be intelligent, graceful, and good hearted. I was trained to hold little or no expectation of others, but to constantly hold myself to the highest possible expectations. My capacity to internalize this ideal and perform accordingly was

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rewarded with approval and allowed me to feel worthy of participation in the patriarchal system. It also resulted in the formulation of strict judgmental attitude against my own mother and my imperfect self.

The shadow of my perfect father's daughter persona was ever present in the person of my mother. While she was certainly meek and submissive to some degree, she had no talent for playing the role of perfection. She was prone to explosive emotional outburst of protest against the role she was assigned, but had no capacity to argue intelligently in her own defense. Even as a child I had some sense of the injustice of the system that my mother was a part of and I assigned myself the task of protecting her, but there was no part of me that was capable of seeing my mother as my father's equal. I identified my mother as a necessity of daily life, responsible for the normal functioning of the household. My affection for her was based primarily upon her usefulness in filling my needs. Although I also developed a kind of empathy for her which stemmed from the understanding that like myself, my father had authority over her. In some ways she was even more powerless than I to challenge him.

In retrospect it is easy for me to mythologize the actual state of my parent's relationship. My father was in no way merely a patriarchal authority. He was an intelligent and loving individual with an excellent sense of humor. My mother was more than a mere victim house wife. She was often very aggressive and venomous towards my father. But my early family life was always kept in balance by the patriarchal authority of my father. He had the final say in all things, and was willing to back up his authority with physical intimidation and force when he found it necessary. I learned to fear my father and disregard my mother.

My mother is the antithesis of everything idealized by the patriarchy. She is unintelligent, overly emotional, irrational and dependent. She did not graduate from high school. She had a psychological breakdown at age thirty-one, suffering from bipolar disorder with paranoid delusions and hallucinations. At age thirty-six she began an extra-marital affair which resulted in the end of her marriage. In the wake of her divorce she began a pattern of alcohol and drug abuse. Her mental health is perpetually unstable, her behaviors and moods are unpredictable. She can shift from kindness to cruelty with little warning and is so changeable that it is difficult to hold her accountable for choices that she has made only moments before.

These negative qualities possessed by my mother should not be seen as overshadowing the positive qualities she possesses. She can also be sensitive and sweet, with a colorful zest for life and a beautiful simple innocence. In many ways, her demeanor and behaviors are not consciously chosen but are rather long standing patterns which have developed as a response to a life of cruel circumstances. But regardless of the legitimate reasons for her state, the idea of being similar to her is deeply disturbing to me.

The link between my own mother and the shadow of the feminine is highly apparent in my personal view, although I avoided making this connection for a very long time. Silvia Brinton Perera said:

Adult daughters of the father find it humiliating to see the bonds of weakness and self-hate which they share with their mothers. The insight nails them to reality, destroys their heroic, grandiose ego-ideal, and initiates a period of descent into depression as they suffer through their identity with the wounded, derogated. (1981, p. 48)

Even given knowledge of the chaotic and destructive dark goddess archetype and seeing the chaotic and destructive patterns my mother lives by, I hesitate to recognize that my mother's mental illness, her unpleasant personality, and her unpredictable behaviors all form a living breathing example of those feminine qualities that I have made a constant effort to avoid and deny.

My mother has presented me with a constant reminder of the very real instability that has lurked under my carefully controlled exterior. Each loss of control that I experienced was self interpreted as the eminent collapse of my idealized façade, and the undeniable manifestation of the underlying reality. I wanted to truly be the gentle and generous, intelligent and independent woman that I pretended to be, but that self was never more than a partial truth, and no amount of self punishment or pretended perfection would ever liberate me from the shadow woman that hid waiting for the moment when she could have a voice.

My relationship with my parents provides a fertile ground upon which I can explore the implications of this question of the value of the shadow feminine. There are certain prejudices that exist within my own experience and form a parallel to those prejudices of modern western culture. In so far as my father lives according to the principle values of modern western society and in so far as my mother lives on the fringe, affected by that value system but unable to participate in a full and productive manner; my vision of my parents is roughly equivalent to societies vision of the positive masculine in relation to the negative feminine.

I understand that I have embraced the elegant and rational ideals of my father and rejected the chaotic and emotional reality represented by my mother. While this selection was in every way reinforced by the subtle attitudes of the larger culture, it was never a matter of a deliberate deception or manipulation. The development of these anti-feminine prejudices has merely been the result of good people attempting to pass along their understanding of what is good in the world, and consequently passing along the assumptions and prejudices that color their own judgment. Achieving a successful reinstatement of the female principle therefore is not a simple matter of rooting out a singular deception, but rather of reexamining all of the foundational assumptions of my childhood. All of the previously attained lessons about what is good, valuable or meaningful become useless in this inquiry.

It took me a long time to achieve a willingness to critically examine my assumptions. As I first became aware of the feminist movement, and the notion of women speaking on behalf of the feminine, I had a difficult time understanding and embracing this as a concept. I found it very difficult to accept any new philosophical doctrine that accused the father and elevated the mother. Although I certainly believed that women had the right to be treated well, and believed in the notion of equality between the sexes, I could not begin to conceive that a system which threatened to undermine the safe and familiar institutions of religion, family and patriarchal government could be good. Church, law and the traditions of the home and family were in my heart and mind the very definitions of goodness.

There have been many feminist speakers who have argued in favor of maintaining the old social conventions and seek a mild sort of reform which offers little practical change in favor of maintaining the status quo. That is only one end of the spectrum. On the other end it is possible to find rebellious women demanding the absolute deconstruction of the patriarchy by any means necessary, including the upheaval of those safe institutions which are most responsible for the suppression of women and feminine qualities.

The elevation of the feminine should not consist of merely demanding more recognition and reward for those idyllic feminine qualities which are already demanded by the patriarchy, although this would be a very comfortable road indeed. We could demand greater reward for possessing the qualities of nurturance, submissiveness, gentleness and compassion, but that is not the whole story of the feminine. That is the one sided feminine which has been invented by the patriarchy. Although this type of female is less valued than the masculine, she has been offered some place within the system; she is the Virgin Mary, Doris Day, Carol Brady, but she is not a complete representation of the feminine. This feminine vision cannot hold the very real shadow which is in as much need of respect and elevation as these ideal women have ever been; this shadow is Baba Yaga, the wicked witch, Kali.

As I have come to understand the various perspective of feminism and finally count myself as a feminist, I find this conflict is not merely external. What is the nature of the change that is needed, and if the value of the feminine is increased which values are sacrificed in return? There is a moral and ethical dilemma that must be address in the acknowledgement of these dark elements of the female. It is difficult to argue in favor of the elevation of the dark feminine on the basis of ethical merit, and yet the health and stability of western society and its individuals may be dependent upon our ability to elevate and integrate this neglected aspect of ourselves.

If we are willing to acknowledge that not all manifestations of the feminine are desirable within the modern cultural paradigm, then we must also acknowledge that there has been some reason for the patriarchies fear and subjugation of the feminine. This is a very controversial area of inquiry, because some might assume that these reasons provide the patriarchy with justification. But having a reason is not the same

thing as having a right. There are many diverse problems that arise from this simple confusion.

There are indeed undeniable elements of the feminine which are inconvenient, ugly and destructive. There is a great deal of motivation within the patriarchy to create order, beauty and utility. Acknowledging the positive aspects of the oppressive dominant side and the negative aspects of the repressed shadow side of the dichotomy is necessary in attempting a clear understanding of the dynamic at work.

It is also essential to acknowledge that despite many of the ethical ideologies espoused by the patriarchy that cruelty and crimes against nature and humanity have increased rather than decreased under the masculine rule.

When we do not accept a quality of the shadow, then it functions behind our back, leaking out when we least expect it. We say that something 'comes over us,' that we don't know what "possessed us" to do something, or we find that the "right hand does not know what the left is doing." (Shepherd, 1993/2007, p. 270)

So although the elevation of the feminine principle requires the elevation of some undesirable qualities, forcing them to be acknowledged and accepted; it does not follow that the repressions encouraged by the masculine ideal has any power to eliminate these undesirable qualities.

One may look at any area of modern western culture and see the same dynamics at play. Advertisements announce the undeniable goodness of each product mass produced for consumption, while Americans everywhere hide their eyes from the destruction caused by our massive consumer addictions. World leaders present their friendly faces kissing babies and waving flags, and later the news reveals a twisted double life of greed, sexual indiscretions and unexplained hypocrisy.

According to Jung:

It is a fact that, even today, a man can stand a relative state of perfection much better and for a longer period than a woman, while as a rule it does not agree with women and may even be dangerous for them. If a woman strives for perfection she forgets the complementary role of completeness, which, though imperfect by itself, forms the necessary counter-part to perfection. For, just as completeness is always imperfect so perfection is always incomplete, and therefore represents a final state which is hopelessly sterile. (1958, p. 33)

The only way to maintain the illusion of masculine perfection is to deny the completeness of the feminine.

These denials go far beyond that which is imposed within an individual psyche, and even beyond interpersonal projections in which one group or another is blamed for the failures of the whole. Humanity also seems to be caught up in the urge to sublimate

the chaotic feminine disorder inherent in nature itself. Religiously, philosophically and scientifically there has been a preference for what is light, energetic, and orderly, at the expense of what is dark, material, and chaotic.

Science has given us the capacity to find the harmonic patterns in nature and utilize this vision of reality as a stronghold against the forces of chaos. The body is divided from the mind, the flesh is divided from the spirit, and the ineffable force of nature is analyzed and rendered into a series of completely reliable laws. Shepherd says:

Based on the belief in an orderly universe, scientists valued a theory in proportion to its ability to explain cause and effect. Science strived to make nature more predictable. Over the centuries, the chaotic side of nature was cast into the shadow along with the Feminine. (1993/2007, p.89)

Even the process of birth, one of the most powerfully positive yet disturbingly imperfect and messy manifestations of the feminine, has at one point been almost entirely overtaken by the antiseptic interference of patriarchal medicine. "The excesses of techno-birthing can only seem reasonable to people who have themselves been split from the natural world, from the inherent wisdom of the body, and from the ineffable relevance of all fleshy pains and pleasures," (Sky, 1993, p. 46).

Nature and the Feminine have a long standing relationship with one another. The very notion of Mother Nature embodies this connection, she is uncontrollable and irrational, the very essence of the natural environment, and simultaneously the essence of the dark feminine. It is easy to perceive the chain of metaphorical connections which links the receptive feminine body with the uncontrolled forces of nature, and thus to the amoral opposition of masculine ethical consciousness. The opposite masculine chain links the active masculine principle, the systematic destruction of ecosystems, and the ethics of suppression of undesired elements and behaviors.

Ecopsychology presents the argument that there is an intricate relationship between an individual's environment and their psychological state. This relationship is reciprocal, the individual's psychological state has an impact upon the environment, and the environment impacts the psychological state. In other words a pathological psyche is likely to damage an otherwise harmonious environment, and living symbiotically in a damaged ecosystem will result in psychological instability.

The repression of the feminine doubly impacts these modern crises affecting each directly and indirectly. The raping of natural resources and the resulting pollution creates a living environment which is bound to have a lasting negative impact on individual psyches, and the internal trauma of living under consistent repression of the feminine creates a population of psychologically unstable individuals who do not value the environment in its natural state of wild chaos.

The repression of the feminine creates a paradox in which it becomes increasingly difficult to function. It is not socially permissible to live openly and honestly. Even minor failures to live up to perfect standards may result in a loss of a job or the respect of your peers. Denial and repression have become the norm in society. There is an almost obsessive need to control, as any loss of control carries the threat of overturning the entire system of carefully constructed illusions. The resultant psychological state creates individuals who are especially prone to lash out at objects upon which these shadow qualities can be projected, including not only the natural environment itself, but also individuals who possess those qualities.

The tensions caused by the internal suppressions and ecological devastations of modern life exert nearly unbearable pressure upon some individuals. While there are certainly some who have managed to survive and even thrive as a part of this system; there are many more who falter and fall, unable to find an affective way to cope with a set of rules which are completely irreconcilable with the individual experience of reality. The number of people who suffer from mental illness and stress related disease is increasing, so too is the number of people who seek to escape this conflict through chemical and non-chemical additions, drugs, alcohol, television, and virtual communities. Each of these addictions provides outlets and escapes from the terrible impossibility of maintaining the illusion of goodness in the undeniable face of real life.

Is it any wonder that the natural landscapes are being systematically destroyed and replaced by farmlands, housing communities, and industrial complexes? Wherever life has sprung up naturally without rules or boundaries there is a compulsion to tear it down and rebuild or replant according to a conscious design. There is a fundamental disagreement between mother the nurturer who becomes the vessel which provides the conditions in which life may follow its own course, and the father as constructor who trims back and appropriates nature's resources in order to make something new and useful according to his own design.

The ideal of completeness presented by the feminine archetype, and even in the idea of the dark goddess is completely harmonious to the goals of ecological protection and sustainable living. Completeness allows equal value to be equated to the wilderness lands as to our homes, gardens, and businesses. It supports sustainability and a harmonious inter-relation between humanity and nature. In "The Rape of the Well-Maidens: Feminist Psychology and the Environmental Crisis" by Mary E. Gomes and Allen de Kanner, there is a powerful reflection on the benefits of feminism on the environment:

A large part of what feminist psychology has to offer the environmental movement is vision – a vision of what our human experience could encompass if liberated from the need to dominate and control. As our defensive walls of separation and domination start to disintegrate, we become open to a world of increasing richness, complexity, and beauty. We are able to appreciate the diversity of life without reducing it to notions of 'more important' or 'less important.' Feminist ecopsychology understands that in bonding with the natural world, ecstatic states of

celebration and interconnection are unleashed – experiences that, in modern society, are repressed in ourselves and oppressed in others. (Gomes & Kanner, 1995, p. 118)

The implication of incorporation of the completeness of the feminine in science is the release of a new and powerful resource, liberated from the struggle to attain perfection a scientist is granted a new form of objectivity that is receptive to what is, without imposing preconceived notions of what ought to be. Perera defines this form of objectivity saying:

This means seeing not what might be good or bad, but what exists before judgement, which is always messy and full of affect and of the preverbal percepts of the near senses (touch, smell, taste). This implies not caring first and foremost about relatedness to an outer other, nor to a collective gestalt or imperative. Seeing this way — which is initially frightening because it cannot be validated by the collective—can provide what Logos consciousness fears as mere chaos, with the possibilities of a totally fresh perception, a new pattern, a creative perspective, a never ending exploration. (1981, p. 32-33)

This is the same vision that scientists under new feminine paradigms are already learning to utilize in order to formulate new and divergent hypotheses. This is not the same objectivity that is currently idealized within traditional science, an objectivity that relies upon independent and verifiable data, it is rather an objectivity that is willing to honor the possibilities presented without the distortions of self editing or attempting to fit previously established observation. This alternative objectivity is referred to as receptivity by Linda Shepherd, “This sense of openness can lead to new insights and new ways of looking at the world. The logical and analytical conscious structures of the mind have great value, but they are also limited,” (1993/2007, p.81)

Receptivity is one of the most difficult states for me to achieve. When I was in the process of planning my scientific experimentation project, I became very hung up about the value of the work I was planning. Although it was clearly outlined in the assignment that we were simply to spend time in nature and allow our own curiosity to suggest a direction of inquiry I felt a great deal of agitation about doing this. I didn't know what I was curious about, and I felt a great deal of anxiety that whatever I was curious about would not be acceptable for a “scientific” observation. I wanted to plan something that was clever, that demonstrated my ingenuity, my capacity to “do” science.

I was still approaching science from the masculine ideal of perfection which unsettled my own internal natural state. It was only after getting out into nature that my psyche settled and allowed an authentic experience of the natural occurrences around me. Once I released my attachment to the notion of perfection I was able to experience fascination and wonder at the events around me, and feel complete and confident in the material that I was able to present.

Socially and culturally we must find a way to reconcile these powerful opposing forces, we must find ways to allow our imperfections and reinstitute the value of completeness. The very survival of humanity is dependent upon it. Without the wild and organic reach of nature and without the freedom to acknowledge the reality of what is (rather than what should be), we will quickly destroy ourselves in our collective quest for perfection.

The choice I made early in my life was to attempt to attain perfection and sacrifice completeness. This choice was made in order to earn the respect and affection of my father and stake a claim for myself in this overpoweringly masculine world. Through my choice I allowed myself to be split into two irreconcilable figures constantly warring with one another, the one battling for absolute control, and the other battling simply for the right to exist. Who knows what disastrous result might have occurred if I had continued in supporting the choice of perfection. It is possible that the irreconcilable state of my own psyche could have led to a breakdown like the one I've observed in my mother. Surely, she too has experienced this irreconcilable pull and although she lacks the capacity to articulate the exact nature of her own experiences with patriarchal idealism, I do not doubt that her experience has been every bit as valid and oppressive as my own

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