

Gender Essentialism

According to the intended original order, [woman's] place is by man's side to master the earth and to care for offspring. But her body and soul are fashioned less to fight and to conquer than to cherish, guard, and preserve.

—EDITH STEIN¹

Many expectant parents eagerly await ultrasound evidence of the sex of their fetus. At birth, the first announcement usually made is the child's sex. This will remain a primary label for the child's life: marked on the birth certificate, checked on the preschool application, written on the kindergarten enrollment papers and summer camp forms. While the label may determine the social and political avenue of the child's life far less than in previous centuries, sex still determines which athletic sports and teams the individual will be able to join, what rate the individual will pay on auto, health, and life insurance, and in many places whom the person can marry. Beyond legal rights and responsibilities the individual's sex will also determine expectations and interactions from the crib to career to nursing home. More primary than citizenship, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or any other attribute, sex seems to be considered an essential part of a human person in Western culture. This view that sex matters is the view

1. Stein, "The Ethos of Woman's Professions," *Essays on Woman*, 73.

of gender essentialism, the most common view about sex and gender in contemporary Western society.

This chapter is an exploration of what the theory of gender essentialism says about being a woman. Studies have shown that pre-school age children consider gender a key part of their identity and the identity of their classmates.² While adults are less likely than small children to make this claim, the overwhelming majority of adults do claim that their gender is a key part of who they are.³ Thus the issue of how very young girls and mature women see themselves as female is worthy of deep consideration. Specifically, this chapter will explore how gender essentialism can highlight what is unique and positive about being a girl and woman. The women philosophers discussed in this chapter use arguments that deny the suggestion that women are inferior versions of men. They claim that women are naturally different than men in both body and mind, while making the case that women are equal to men in terms of natural and social value.

What Is Gender Essentialism?

Gender is defined as the classification of male or female that includes social, psychological, emotional, and intellectual characteristics. *Essentialism* is a philosophical position that claims that individuals in a category or class share an essential property. This essential property, this essence, is what makes the individual a member of the category. *Gender essentialism* is the stance that gender is a significant characteristic of a person.

Gender essentialism usually begins with a view that biological sex is connected to gender. This means that most gender essentialists assert that there is a real and essential difference between a male body and a female body in terms of anatomy, chemistry, and DNA. Furthermore, most gender essentialists suggest that the intellectual, social, emotional, and psychological characteristics of a human individual are related to the person's body. Some gender essentialists are materialists. Unwilling to make a split between the mind and brain or the emotions and hormones, many gender essentialists will claim that sex characteristics directly cause gender characteristics. For example, they might argue that the oxytocin in the blood of the nursing mother creates a calming and caring attitude in the mother towards her infant. Many gender essentialists who are not strict materialists

2. See Gelman et al., *Mother-Child Conversations*.

3. See Witt, *Metaphysics of Gender*, xi.

are committed to a philosophical stance concerning the mind and the body known as *hylomorphism*. *Hylomorphism* is a stance that states that the mind or soul is the form of the body. Generally, gender essentialists assert that the difference between the male and the female relates both to the biology and to the psychology of the person. Most gender essentialists claim that being male or female relates to the body and the mind, to chemistry and psychology, to DNA strands and to roles in society.

The reader should note that *most* gender essentialists *usually* hold this stance. There are some contemporary thinkers who have attempted to re-define gender essentialism in other interesting and unique ways that will be explored at the end of this chapter. The key to any theory of gender essentialism is the stance that there are real and important differences between a man and a woman that must be considered in order to understand a human individual and in order to help him or her flourish.

Thinking Woman: Hildegard of Bingen

When God looked upon the human countenance, God was exceedingly pleased. For had not God created humanity according to the divine image and likeness? Human beings were to announce all God's wondrous works by means of their tongues that were endowed with reason. . . . God gave the first man a helper in the form of woman, who was man's mirror image, and in her the whole human race was present in a latent way. God did this with manifold creative power, just as God had produced in great power the first man. Man and woman are in this way so involved with each other that one of them is the work of the other. Without woman, man could not be called man; without man, woman could not be called woman. Thus woman is the work of man, while man is a sight full of consolation for woman. Neither of them could henceforth live without the other. . . . And thus the human species sits on the judgment seat of the world. It rules over all creation. Each creature is under our control and in our service. We human beings are of greater value than all other creatures.⁴

4. Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works*, 122.

Biography

Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century theologian, philosopher, natural scientist, musician, and artist did significant work on the question of the nature and vocation of women. Indeed, she is considered the first Western thinker to articulate a philosophical theory that a woman is not a deficient form of a man but that a woman is a distinct type of human being.⁵ Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bockelheim, in Mainz, on the Nahe River in the wine country of Germany, the tenth child of wealthy parents. Even as a young child, she had visionary experiences and unusual intellectual and healing abilities. However, Hildegard was told that she should hide such skills and visions as they could be considered marks of witchcraft.

Around the age of eight, Hildegard was given as an offering to the service of the church and placed with a well-known holy woman, Jutta of Sponheim. Her parents called this offering a tithe, as Hildegard was their tenth child. While later Hildegard argued against the practice of parents tithing their children, evidence shows that her early religious upbringing did cultivate her unique gifts. Jutta lived alone with Hildegard, and possibly a few other girls, near the abbey at Disibodenberg. In this isolation, Jutta taught Hildegard the Psalms, elementary Latin, and a great deal about plants, herbs, and the healing arts. When she turned fifteen, Hildegard joined the Benedictine abbey as a fully habited nun.

Scholars debate the extent of Hildegard's education. While she was certainly literate, she claimed that she struggled to read well. For example, at age forty-nine she wrote a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux in which she asked his opinion of why it was that sometimes she was able to read and understand a text and other times the words bewildered her.⁶ In addition, she believed herself to be inadequately educated in philosophy and theology compared to the scholars of her time. Her writings and letters demonstrate knowledge of many of the ideas of Augustine and other fathers of the church; the library of Disibodenberg would have held many of ancient and late-antique texts.⁷ But she never referred to specific works and authors in her own writings. Furthermore, while some contemporary commentators suggest that Hildegard's references to herself as an un-lettered woman were

5. See Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 292. "Hildegard of Bingen emerged as the first philosopher to articulate a complete theory of sex complementarity."

6. Hildegard, "Letter 1," in *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 27.

7. See Mews, *Hildegard and the Schools*, 89–110. See, also Mews, *Heloise and Hildegard*, 20–29.

only formulaic expressions of her humility, she herself claimed she could not write like the philosophers do. She admitted her secretary needed to correct her grammar when he copied her original writing from wax tablets onto paper. Even still, many translators note that the texts have particular quirks and are difficult to translate in sections.⁸ Interestingly, she wrote many pages in her own hand in a *lingua ignota* (unknown language) using an alphabet that she created herself for reasons scholars still do not understand.

In general, Hildegard's insistence that she was not a typical scholar, not a theologian or a philosopher in the academic sense, must be considered accurate. Unlike her contemporary, Heloise, who was fluent in Greek and Latin and able to quote ancient Greek and Roman texts with ease, Hildegard's writings are those of a woman who had a basic understanding of Latin, no knowledge of Greek, and a self-expressed difficulty with reading and writing grammatically. These deficiencies made Hildegard's genius all the more pronounced both to the community around her and to Hildegard herself.

Hildegard's rise to prominence began when she became the abbess of her community in 1136 after Jutta's death. In 1141, she declared that God was calling her to write a major work called *Scivias* (*Knowledge*). The work begins with the call she heard from God.

Behold, in the forty-third year of my passing journey, when I clung to a heavenly vision with fear and trembling, I saw a very great light from which a heavenly voice spoke and said to me: "O weak person, both ashes of ashes, and decaying of the decaying, speak and write what you see and hear."⁹

Hildegard continued to explain the call in detail.

In the year 1141 of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, a burning light coming from heaven poured into my mind. Like a flame which does not burn but rather enkindles, it inflamed my heart and my breast, just as the sun warms something with its rays. And I was able to understand books suddenly, the psalter clearly, the evangelist and the volumes of the Old and New Testament, but I did not have the interpretation of the words of their texts nor the

8. See "Introduction" in *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vii. Also see "Editor's note," *Scivias*, vii.

9. Hildegard, *Scivias*, 1.

division of their syllables nor the knowledge of their grammar. . . . I truly saw those visions; I did not perceive them in dreams, nor while sleeping, nor in a frenzy, nor with the human eyes or with the external ears of a person, nor in remote places; but I received those visions according to the will of God while I was awake and alert with a clear mind, with the innermost eyes and ears of a person, and in open places.¹⁰

Hildegard continued in her preface to the *Scivias* to give the words she received from God. She explained that she was reluctant to begin work on the book until she was urged by others for the sake of her own health to answer the call. These others who encouraged her to write and publish her work included “a noble man and a woman of good wishes,”¹¹ her confessor Godfrey, Godfrey’s abbot Conon, the archbishop of Mainz, and finally Pope Eugenius III.

In addition to the *Scivias*, Hildegard wrote two other works of philosophical theology: *Liber Divinorum Operum* (*The Book of Divine Works*) and *The Liber Vitae Meritoriam* (*The Book of Life Merits*). In all three philosophical-theological works, Hildegard included a visual picture and a description of each vision as well as the theological message she believed the vision proclaimed. In addition to the three works in philosophical theology, she wrote a treatise on natural science (*Physica*) and a book of causes and cures that relate to medicine (*Causae et Curae*). She also wrote two spiritual biographies (one for Saint Disibod and one for Saint Rupert), several commentaries, many homilies, a large number of liturgies, hymns and plays, and hundreds of letters to political, academic, and church leaders in Europe. These leaders included bishops, archbishops, popes, and the Holy Roman Emperor Barbarossa. Besides writing, traveling and preaching throughout the Rhine Valley, Belgium, Switzerland, and France, she also created the architectural plans for the two convents that she founded. Throughout Germany and beyond, she was well known as a healer, an artist, a musician, a preacher, and an advisor on spiritual and philosophical concerns. There are several letters addressed to her from academics at the University of Sorbonne, from political and church leaders, and from lay people. These letters asked for her theological and philosophical insight as well as her prayers.

10. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

11. *Ibid.*, 3.

Despite her popularity, or maybe because of it, she was investigated for impropriety on several occasions. There were concerns that she only allowed women of a certain social class to join her convent. She explained that she believed that the social classes were ordained by God and should not be mixed in community, a view that was held by many medieval thinkers. There were concerns that her nuns should not wear their hair loose nor don elaborate headdresses. Hildegard explained that the beauty of a virgin's hair was not scandalous but pleasing to God. And finally, towards the end of her life, the Church placed her entire community under censure. Her community was denied the right to perform liturgy or participate in the Eucharist, while officials investigated a claim that Hildegard had allowed the burial of a damned man in a sanctified cemetery. Hildegard obeyed the orders of the censure but refused to exhume the man's bones. She was resolute that he had confessed before his death and was right with God. The church, in the end, agreed that the man's body could remain where it lay; the censure was lifted.

On September 17th in 1170 Hildegard died. At her death, many recalled that the sky was filled by two streams of light that crossed over the building in which her body lay. She has been revered as a saint by German Catholics for centuries. In 2012, the Vatican formally named her a saint recognized by the whole of the Roman Catholic Church.

Hildegard's Feminine Epistemology

Like many of the women that will be highlighted in this book, Hildegard's quest to understand the nature and vocation of women began with her recognition of herself as a woman who did not fit the gender stereotypes of her time. Hildegard, in the *Scivias*, claimed that she experienced visions from God from a young age, but that she hid this from others. In addition, as an adult she found herself enlightened by theological insights which she felt compelled to share with others. This was bewildering to Hildegard who believed that the church was right to forbid the preaching and publishing of theology by women, especially unlearned women. In the *Scivias* and in her letters, the reader finds Hildegard struggling to understand herself and her insights. What emerges is an interestingly feminine *epistemology*, a theory of knowledge that explains whence insight comes. Hildegard wanted to explain how women come to know.

Hildegard would have been familiar with the epistemology of Augustine, a fourth-century African theologian and philosopher who was authoritative in the Western Catholic church. Augustine claimed that insight is possible because the divine light of God shines upon the human mind in order to allow it to see clearly. Augustine's *theory of illumination* had become the philosophically accepted epistemological position by the twelfth century in the Western church and academic schools. His own account of his illumination is significant because the reader can see the similarities with Hildegard's account of her illumination. Augustine wrote,

I entered and I saw such as it was with the eyes of my soul above the eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light: not this common light seen by all flesh, nor something of the same type but greater. . . . No this light was not that, but another, completely other than all these. Nor was she above my mind, as oil is above water, nor as the sky is above the earth; but superior, because she made me, and I was inferior, because I was made by her. Whoever knows truth, knows her, and whoever knows her, knows eternity. Love knows her. O eternal Truth, and true Love and lovely Eternity! You are my God, to you I sigh day and night. . . . And you cried to me from a long way off: I am that which is. And I heard as one hears in the heart, and there was no use for doubt. . . .¹²

The similarities between this passage from Augustine and the first passage in the *Scivias* Hildegard's are striking. Both Hildegard and Augustine wrote of God as a light that is seen by the soul not the eyes and a voice that speaks not to the ears but to the heart. Hildegard's account of God, like Augustine's, used masculine, neuter, and feminine imagery to explain a deity that is Creator, Sustainer, and Illuminator.

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7:10. My translation from the Latin which reads:

Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum, intravi in intima mea, duce te, et potui, quoniam factus es adiutor meus. Intravi et vidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam, lucem incommutabile: non hanc vulgarem et conspicuam omni carni, nec quasi ex eodem genere grandior erat, tamquam si ista multo multoque clarius claresceret totumque occuparet magnitudine. Non hoc illa erat, sed aliud, aliud valde ab istis omnibus. Nec ita erat supra mentem meam, sicut oleum super aquam, nec sicut caelum super terram; sed superior, quia ipsa fecit me, et ego inferior, quia factus abbe a. qui novit veritatem, novit eam, et qui novit eam, novit aeternitatem. Caritas novit eam. O aeterna veritas et vera caritas et cara aeternitas! Tu es deus meus, tibi suspiro die ac nocte. . . . et clamasti de longinquo: ego sum qui sum. Et audivi, sicut auditor in corde, et non erat prorsus unde dubitarem, faciliusque dubitarem vivere me, quam non esse veritatem, quae per ea, quae facta sunt, intellectus conspicitur.

However, in the twelfth century, Hildegard was taught a theory of gender that clearly stated that women were inferior in mind and unsuitable for academics and ministry. Thus, Hildegard was bewildered by her illumination and her ability to understand Scripture deeply. Her initial letter to Bernard de Clairvaux shows that she struggled intellectually to understand how her feminine mind was capable of such great insight. While Bernard and others encouraged her to write and preach about her ideas, Hildegard could not let go of the epistemological question of how she, a relatively uneducated woman, was capable of such knowledge. Her struggle to answer this question in her letters and in her theological works created a new epistemology in Western Christianity that allowed a space for women to understand themselves as thinkers.

Hildegard's feminine epistemology insists that knowledge is a gift of grace from the divine, a gift that can be given to men or to women. While Hildegard's position did not challenge the traditional medieval view that women's minds were inferior to men's, it did challenge the view that women's insights were inferior to men's. In fact, by asserting that a woman with insight was divinely inspired, Hildegard gave power to women's insights and a mandate to women thinkers. Importantly, she used this theory to encourage other women to write and teach their ideas. Most notable is her encouragement of her protégé Elisabeth of Schoneau.¹³ Later, her insistence that God can give insight to whomever God chooses was used by other medieval women to explain their own calling to write theology and philosophy.

Further, Hildegard's epistemology makes an important claim that the human mind is often inadequate at discovering profound truths. Rather than claim that women's minds are as rational and capable as men's, Hildegard made the more ancient claim that neither the male nor female mind could enlighten itself. Yet, she explained that the female mind is more aware of its limits than the male. Thus, at times, God chooses to give insight to a woman in order to humble humanity and force the recognition that it is God who has ultimate power and truth.

13. See Hildegard, "Letter to Elisabeth of Schoneau," *Secrets of God*, 163–65. See also Hildegard, "Letter 35," *Book of Divine Works*, 338–49.

Hildegard's Gender Essentialist Theory of Virtue

Hildegard asserted that men and women are essentially different from each other in important ways. These differences are necessary and intended by God, for men and women complement each other. She also asserted that in terms of physical strength, intellectual prowess, and moral self-control, men are superior to women. However, Hildegard's great theological insight for her time was her claim that God does not value one creature over another because of strength, prowess, and control. Indeed, Hildegard in the *Scivias* explained that the fall of Lucifer occurred because of his arrogant trust in his own power.¹⁴ In contrast, Adam, Eve, and humans generally have the ability to be saved, primarily because they are aware of their own weaknesses and thus are open to salvation. One of Hildegard's main objectives in her theological texts was to make the case that value and power are not synonymous. Her message to European Christians and to their emperor Barbarossa was that the belief in the superiority of power, strength, and prowess was a dangerous error.

This is clear in Hildegard's *Scivias* where she wrote in detail about the fall in the Garden of Eden and the salvation that hangs on the cross. Contradicting the mainstream medieval belief that Eve created the first sin because of feminine weakness and evil inclination, Hildegard insisted that both Adam and Eve sinned not because of what was worst in them but because of what was best. Hildegard wrote of Eve's soft and obedient nature as a gift of the divine intended to make her a warm and gentle mother. But these gifts were turned against her and humanity by the Serpent who chose her because her trusting nature was easy to manipulate.¹⁵ Also, Adam's willingness to listen to his wife was not a sign of weakness but a sign of his great love of his wife, a love that had been granted to him to cause peace, harmony, and loving collaborative leadership in Eden. Hildegard insisted that the devil made use of humanity's greatest gifts in order to harm all creation. Human strengths became human weaknesses. God, aware of this, used weakness as strength to conquer Lucifer who was unable to see that value does not come from power. Value comes only from God and love.

14. See Hildegard, "Vision Two," *Scivias*, 32–33.

15. Hildegard, "Vision Two section 10," *Scivias*, 18. "Why did the devil approach Eve? Because the devil knew the tenderness of a woman was more easily conquered than the strength of a man. The devil also saw that Adam's love for Eve was burning so strongly that if the devil was able to conquer Eve, whatever she might say to Adam, Adam would do the same."

God, by taking on the weakness of an infant in the manger and a dying human on the cross, tricked Lucifer. Lucifer falsely believed that he had conquered Christ only to be conquered himself by the triumph of Life over death.¹⁶ Hildegard had no qualms in criticizing her contemporaries when they, like Lucifer, made mistakes of valuing strength rather than recognizing the saving power of humility. She reminded both women and men, “Armed with humility and charity, you do not need to fear the snares of the devil, but you will possess everlasting life.”¹⁷

Thus Hildegard, as a medieval Christian posed an interesting type of feminist spirit. Often she used words that might seem derogatory such as *weakness, tenderness, frailty, and humility* to describe women’s attributes only to explain that these are also Christ’s attributes that defeated the strength, pride, and power of Lucifer. Women and women’s virtues are important and necessary parts of creation that complement men and men’s virtues. Yet, ultimately, rather than asserting an equality of men and women in mind or body, she asserted that the equality of men and women is in their value before God. On this equality she was insistent. Because of this foundational theological view that men and women are equal before God, she made claims that natural differences between men and women are not examples of merits and deficiencies but examples of diversity created by God for the good of Creation and for human life.

Hildegard’s View of Physiology

Hildegard is still famous today for her explanations and explorations into human physiology and medicine. While these can be taken separately from her theology, it is important to note that Hildegard’s theology grounded her studies in these sciences. Hildegard is considered a *hylomorphist*, a philosopher who claims that the soul is not separate from the body but the very essence of the body. The soul gives the body shape, form, and life. The body without a soul is only dust, yet there can be no human soul without the dust it informs. This view had biblical foundations for Hildegard. She read *Genesis* as saying that God created humans by warming and nourishing mud with divine breath. She read *Ezekiel* as proclaiming that God had

16. See Hildegard, “Vision Two: section 32,” *Scivias*, 24. “The Word of God snatched humanity from the devil through the shedding of blood, and the Word led humanity back to heavenly glory. How did the Word do this? With humility and love.”

17. Hildegard, “Vision Two: 33,” *Scivias*, 25.

the power to resurrect the bones of the saved. For Hildegard, the body is an integral part of the human person that is created and redeemed by God.

Indeed, she believed the most dangerous heresy, or unorthodox teaching, of her time was that of the flesh-denying Gnostic cult, the Cathars. The Cathars preached rhetorically seductive sermons about the evils of the body and dangers of the flesh. Their views had gained popularity throughout Germany because of their excellent preaching ability and because of the hypocrisy and moral laxity within the Catholic Church. While Hildegard was concerned about stories of pregnant nuns and lascivious priests, Hildegard's admonishment was that the Church needed to pay more attention to the body, bodily pleasures, bodily needs, and bodily health. This meant that preachers needed training in rhetoric in order to better move the hearts of the believer to faith and works. Her own attention to church music and liturgy was meant to delight the ear of the churchgoer in order that the congregant see that true delight is in faith. In addition, she advocated that the church needed to create better structures and rules within religious communities. Importantly, she did not advocate tightening the rules as a Cathar might advise. Rather she claimed the Church needed to make certain that the rules corresponded accurately to human nature and need. She asserted that not all people were called into the cloister's strict rules of abstinence. She advocated against tithing children who were not of age to discern their own religious calls and firmly denounced putting divorced women into convents against their will. Even in the cloister, she sought changes in rules of fasting so that the health of the religious person could be best attended. She consistently advocated that the health of the body be a primary concern.

Hildegard's gardens, vineyards, and powers as a healer were well known in her own time. Her book of *Causes and Cures* is still read today by readers interested in holistic medicine. In this book, many of Hildegard's views of sexual physiology are presented. Before Hildegard, there were few books in the West discussing the female body and its physical concerns, including menstruation, fertility, sexuality, childbirth, menopause, and migraine. Hildegard explained these uniquely feminine concerns and applicable remedies for feminine disorders. Credited as giving the first scientific account of the female orgasm, Hildegard wrote plainly about female sexuality and how it affects the health and well being of the whole woman. She insisted that for many women and men sexuality is an important part of their well-being. In addition, she more accurately described sexual reproduction and

embryology than most scientists and medical practitioners of her era. She rejected the commonly accepted theory of the sperm as a *homunculus*, a tiny but whole human being who needs only a womb in order to grow. Instead, she claimed that the female has reproductive matter, “a weak and sparse foam,”¹⁸ that is essential to the creation of the embryo. Also, essential to the creation of a healthy and strong child, asserted Hildegard, is mutual love and care between the sexual partners.¹⁹

Hildegard was clear that care of the human person requires care of body and this includes differentiated care that is appropriate for each sex. This is a key part of her gender essentialism. She recognized that the differences in female and male bodies necessarily relate to differences in their personalities and psyches. Hildegard insisted on recognition of these differences while at the same time insisting that these differences are God-given and necessary for the care and sustenance of all creation. Most importantly, while Hildegard did mention the way sex differences allow for reproduction and childrearing, her praise for virginity demonstrates that she believed that sex differences are valuable in themselves. Hildegard praised the virgin woman before God. God’s delight in the female nature is not in terms of men’s delight, for the female is valuable in herself as a woman. God created gender diversity for its own sake, out of love of differing natures.

Hildegard’s Gender Essentialism Beyond the Gender Binary

Hildegard of Bingen has been credited as being the first Western thinker to create a full philosophical account of gender essentialism. Part of what makes her account remarkable is that she strove to explain the phenomena that contradict a simple *gender binary* that claims there are only two genders. She denied that all men share one essence while all women share another. Hildegard, in *Causes and Cures*, wrote as a natural scientist carefully describing four different types of men and four different types of women. For each of the eight types she listed physical and psychological characteristics; and she described the type of care, regulation, and lifestyle that benefits each. For example, she described men who have feminine physical

18. See Hildegard, “Conception, Causes and Cures 78a-b,” *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine*, 81. And see “Embryology, Causes and Cures 42a- 44b” *On Natural Philosophy*, 43–44.

19. See Hildegard, “Causes and Cures 24a-25b,” *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine*, 51.

characteristics and little facial hair and women who are prone to growing hair upon their chins. She also explained that there are variations in sexual desire caused by these differences in physiology.²⁰ Most importantly, she was clear that she believed that God can and does enter into human history to give the charisms of one sex type to another. She spoke of women, like herself, who were given the gifts of rhetoric and preaching who had to use male role models for themselves. She also spoke of men who were given the gift of virginity who had to use female role models in order to truly open themselves to God.²¹ In her theological works she explained how God uses both male and female characteristics to speak and save human beings. Crucial to her view is that Christ took on the biological male body but used feminine humility for salvation on the Cross.

Feminist Merits of Hildegard's Gender Essentialism

By claiming that male and female human beings are essentially different in body and soul and essentially equal in value before God, Hildegard challenged the dominant medieval idea that women were deficient men. In her theological, philosophical, and scientific texts, she made the rational, scriptural, and scientific cases that women are a kind unto themselves. As such she was able to do a number of important things. First, Hildegard wrote frankly and explicitly about women's health care; she made significant contributions to gynecology. Importantly, Herrad of Landesberg (1130–95) later wrote an important and authoritative encyclopedia for women called *The Garden of Delight* using some of Hildegard's insights. Hildegard, herself, became a celebrity in health care in her time. People, especially women, lined the riverbanks hoping to be healed by her words and remedies as she traveled by boat up and down the Rhine. Her remedies for many physiological concerns, particularly her special diets for various female ailments, continue to be studied and used today. Socially and politically, she advocated for new rules governing marriage and religious institutions. She created theological space for women to preach and teach their understanding of Scripture and of the relationship with God. Her understanding of gender as both real and God-given became an important part of Western Christian understanding of woman and woman's value.

20. See Hildegard, "Causes and Cures, 50b-66b," *On Natural Philosophy*, 56–65.

21. See McInerney, "Like a Virgin."