Ecofeminism

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In this essay I shall present several influential ecological feminist positions, discuss some common criticisms of ecological feminist views, and situate ecological feminism with respect to other approaches to environmental philosophy. Although the focus of this volume is on environmental ethics as an academic discipline, a central commitment of ecofeminist theorists, including Noel Sturgeon and Greta Gerard, has been to link theory with political activism. Although ecological feminist scholarship is extremely rich and varied, someone else could have approached this topic very differently. Although what follows is not meant to be comprehensive, I do hope to provide readers with an appreciation for the kinds of concerns and questions commonly taken up in ecological feminist literature.

“Ecological feminism,” or “ecofeminism,” refers to a series of theoretical and practical positions bringing feminist insight to environmental philosophy. Feminist theorists began formulating theories explicitly addressing similarities and connections between sexism and abuses of nature in the early 1970s. Anthologies specifically devoted to the topic, such as Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecological Feminism (Plant 1989) and Reworking the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism (Diamond and Orenstein 1990), began to appear in the late 1980s. Although there is a variety of ecofeminist positions, ecofeminists agree there is a link between dominations of women and dominations of nature, and that an understanding of one is crucial to the understanding of the other. Ecofeminists argue that an environmental philosophy that fails to attend to these important links will be theoretically and practically deficient. The kinds of connection commonly made by ecological feminists between feminism and the environment include the historical, conceptual, empirical, epistemological, ethical, theoretical, and political. I shall present examples of arguments for these connections from prominent ecological feminist work.

Historical connections

Many ecological feminists argue that a historical look at the ways in which women and other oppressed groups have been associated with the “natural” and the ways in which nature has been associated with the “womandly” or the “feminine” in western contexts reveals important connections. Prominent examples can be found in Griffin (1978) and Merchant (1983). Merchant examines the emergence of modern science in Europe in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. She argues that the shift in worldview—from the organic to the mechanistic was a major vehicle for the devaluation of both women and nature.
Merchant maintains that the shift from the earth-centered to the sun-centered worldview was a significant factor. In the earth-centered view, characteristic of Renaissance and pre-Renaissance thought, earth was associated with two aspects of womanliness: nurturing mother and uncontrollable female who could be violent and chaotic. Shifting to a sun-centered view meant replacing a woman-centered universe with a male-centered one, as the sun was traditionally associated with manliness. In addition, the Aristotelian association of activity with masculinity and passivity with femininity was revived in the sixteenth century, as is shown by the following quote from Copernicus: "the earth conceives by the sun and becomes pregnant with annual offspring" (1983, p. 7). Merchant argues that the idea that change could occur not only on earth but everywhere, which was associated with the sun-centered view, caused fear that nature's order could break down. This resulted in the desire to control nature. Hence, the part of womanliness that became the dominant conception of nature was the wild, violent side. The other association of nature as a nurturing mother that was part of the organic approach became less prevalent. Merchant quotes Machiavelli:

"Fortune is a woman and it is necessary, if you wish to master her to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that she lets herself be overcome by the bold rather than by those who proceed coldly, and therefore like a woman, she is always a friend to the young because they are less cautious, bolder, and master her with greater audacity." (ibid, p. 130)

Other disruptions in the social order, including the breakdown of the feudal system, brought fear of chaos. Merchant suggests that women's increased visibility in social life, such as the Protestant reform movements in northern Europe, and the long reign of Elizabeth I, was threatening to the social order. At any rate, fear of women by the men in control reached a peak in the European witch hunts.

Merchant's discussion of Francis Bacon (supposedly the father of modern science) is often discussed by ecological feminists as a particularly clear example of how the association of women and nature has been dangerous for both. Bacon's justification of the scientific method involved likening nature to a woman being tried for witchcraft. His mentor, James I of England, was a strong supporter of the trials. In an attempt to "sell" James on the scientific method Bacon stated:

"For you have but to follow and hound nature and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterward to the same place again.... Neither ought a man to make a sample of entering and penetrating those holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object - as your majesty has shown in his own example." (ibid, p. 168)

Ecofeminists such as Merchant have been a major source for reminding feminists, environmentalists, and others how the twin dominations of women and nature have been intertwined historically and conceptually (see Early Modern Philosophy).

Value dualisms and the logic of domination

Analysis of value dualisms plays a major role in ecological feminist critiques of western patriarchal cultures. Val Plumwood (1993) offers one of the most comprehensive discussions of dualisms and dualistic thinking. A value dualism is a disjunctive pair in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional and exclusive, and which places higher value on one disjunct than the other. Many ecological feminists argue that reason/nature dualism underlies the conceptual framework of western patriarchal cultures. This dualism is thought to form the basis for a series of related dualisms in which whatever is associated with reason is viewed as fundamentally different and superior to whatever is associated with nature.

Examples of such dualized pairs involve not only reason/nature and masculine/feminine, but also mental/manual, civilized/primitive, and human/nature. These pairs function to legitimate a number of oppressions, including sex, race, and class oppression, which can all be seen in terms of the central dualism underlying the system, that of reason/nature.

It is crucial to realize that not all differences are dualisms, and deconstructing value dualisms does not mean denying all differences between dualized pairs. The problem with value dualisms lies in the construction of dualized pairs as absolutely different in morally relevant ways, which leads to the construction and justification of moral hierarchies.

The construction of dualized identities involves five features, according to Plumwood. These are (i) backgrounding, the oppressors' creation of a dependency on the oppressed while simultaneously denying that dependency; (ii) radical exclusion, constructing supposed differences between oppressors and the oppressed in terms of radical difference in order to justify subordination of the oppressed; (iii) incorporation, the construction of the devalued side of a dualized pair as lacking morally relevant features associated with the other side; (iv) instrumentalism, the construction of groups seen as morally inferior, lacking any morally important independent interests; (v) homogenization, the denial of differences between those on the underside of dualized pairs (seeing all women or all slaves as the same).

Another influential critique of dualistic thinking places it in a larger oppressive framework said to underlie all the "isms" of domination. Karen J. Warren (1990) explores major conceptual connections between the domination of women by men and the domination of nature by humans. She argues that both depend on the "logic of domination." This logic uses premises about differences between entities, asserts that such differences constitute the moral superiority of one group, and that being superior entails members of the superior group to subordinate members of the inferior group. A typical form of such arguments is as follows:

(A1) Humans do, plants do not, have the capacity to consciously change the community in which they live.

(A2) Whatever has this capacity is morally superior to whatever doesn't have.

(A3) Humans are morally superior to plants and rocks.
on ecological feminism include articles on animals and discussions of hunting. Theorists such as Greta Gaard, Lori Gruen, Dean Curtin, and Carol J. Adams argue that vegetarianism should be a component of an ecofeminist praxis.

Adams argues that concern about animals is part of the ecological feminist project not only because acknowledging their value is part of dismantling the logic of domination, but also because the domination of the earth more generally is part of animal agriculture. In addition, Adams ties the domination of animals in with the domination and exploitation of black women, who are “dumb animals” in US poultry processing plants must suffer the heaves out of 5,000 chickens’ chest cavities per hour. According to Adams: “Both women workers and the chickens themselves are the means to the end of consumption, but because consumption has been disembodied, their oppressions as worker and consumable body are invisible” (1991, p. 131).

The strategy of looking for connections between various types of oppression, domination, and exploitation is evident in other ecofeminist discussions of animals. Chris Cuomo’s examination of chicken processing includes the cruel treatment of chickens, discusses how 33 percent of the Perdue workers hired to slaughter chickens end up with a crippling condition of the hands and wrists caused by having to slaughter up to 75 chickens per minute, and that the huge majority of these workers are women of color (1998, p. 102). She writes about how the dairy industry mistreats cows, and also discusses farms as sites of human oppression. Her examples include that 80–90 percent of hired farm workers are Latino, followed by African-Americans, Caribbeans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Jamaicans; that it is estimated that as many as 313,000 farm workers contract pesticide-related illnesses per year; that Hispanic women show higher levels of pesticides in their milk than white women; and that the miscarriage rate for female farm workers is seven times the national average (ibid, p. 36).

Adams uses the ecological feminist critique of dualistic thinking to argue against the current split between maintenance and production. This split allows people to maintain diets based on animal flesh without thinking about the ethically problematic aspect of meat production. An ethic that linked maintenance with production would identify not only the exploitation of animals and workers as part of the costs of meat production, but would count the loss of topsoil, water, and the demands on fossil fuels that meat production requires (see LAND AND WATER). However, government aid to the dairy and beef industry prevents the price of animal-eating from being reflected in the commodity of meat. For example, hamburger would be $35 per pound and beefsteak would be $89 per pound (1991, p. 131). Another way in which production processes are hidden from consumers is by concealing the true lives of both animals and workers from the majority of consumers. Thus, the fact that those of us who eat meat interact with animals daily is hidden from many meat eaters because the animal disappears when we interact with a form of food named meat. While Adams views all meat-eating as morally problematic, others such as Gaard, Gruen, and Curtin have argued for a contextual vegetarianism, granting that in certain contexts meat-eating may be acceptable, while in others it is not.
Environmental racism

The strategy of looking for connections between oppressions is also evident in ecofeminist discussions of environmental racism. Environmental racism is demonstrated by figures such as these: two-thirds of all Blacks and Latinos in the United States reside in areas with one or more unregulated toxic-waste site, and race is the most significant factor which differentiates between communities with such sites and communities without them (Cuomo 1998, pp. 65-6). As Cuomo points out, ecological feminism is helpful in raising questions such as how ethical, economic, and aesthetic discourses justifies racist, toxic politics, how disempowerment and alienation make it particularly difficult for communities to fight back, how racist conceptions of people and cities as unclean and hopeless justifies mistreatment and how in male-dominated cultures women may be disproportionately affected by toxins. In addition, ecological feminism reminds us that toxic dumping is not only a problem concerning human well-being, but it affects non-humans as well. Ecological feminism helps reveal how various oppressions are linked, and can ensure that strategies for change which might actually replicate oppression are not pursued (see ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE).

Ecofeminism and critiques of development

Another key direction in ecological feminist thought analyzes how first-world development of third-world countries imports problematic patriarchal ideals, causing special problems for women in the countries that are “developed.” Vandana Shiva’s book Staying Alive (1989) is a classic. Shiva claims that development, which she terms “ma(development),” has been highly problematic for those who have been developed, and that while both sexes are affected by development, it is often women who have the most to lose. Her book is a theoretical analysis of the development process, using India as an example.

According to Shiva, western development was supposed to be a postcolonial project, giving “underdeveloped” countries the choice to accept the western model of progress, without having to endure the subjugation and exploitation involved in being colonized. This assumed that western-style progress was possible and desirable for all. However, Shiva argues that western-style progress and the economic model that it involves creates poverty as it creates wealth, and this is endemic to western models of progress.

Shiva maintains that this kind of development destroys sustainable lifestyles and creates true material poverty for those who are developed. Resources needed for the purpose of sustenance are diverted for use in the production of cash crops and other commodities to be sold on the market. This robs those who suffer development of the resources they had been using to survive. Shiva distinguishes between two types of poverty: “culturally perceived poverty” and real material poverty. According to western models, people living in subsistence economies are seen as poor because they do not produce surplus to be bought and sold on the global market. In reality, people living in subsistence economies might indeed have their survival needs met quite well, and the quality of their lives can be even better than those living according to western models of progress. By standards of western development, these people are poor by definition, as poverty is defined as not participating in the global economy. One of Shiva’s central points is that attempts to remove culturally perceived poverty often create real material poverty, the absence of things needed for survival. The quality of life of those who are “developed” is often higher before “development” occurs.

Shiva refers to the western model as western patriarchy. Drawing on work by Merchant and others, she argues that the devaluation of women and nature typical of western-style patriarchy is imported in development projects. The result is that while men and women are negatively affected by development projects, the patriarchal nature of the values which are part of the western model means development is often worse for women than it is for men. Just as in the West, women’s knowledge is discredited as unscientific, useless, and perhaps even dangerous. Real scientific knowledge, mainly controlled by men, is said to be the only true knowledge. As these new scientific methods are employed, women, as the primary producers of food, water, and fuel, are displaced, and their practices are undermined. However, because new methods paid little or no attention to nature’s cycles, and to the ways that natural processes are interconnected, the results are often unsustainable. In chapters on food, water, and forests, Shiva documents in impressive detail how modern scientific techniques are largely unsuccessful, destroying previously sustainable lifestyles. She also documents how women have become organizational leaders against development in India.

Charges of essentialism

A large number of ecological feminists argue that to solve the “ecological crisis,” we need to celebrate values which have been developed in western patriarchal contexts. Hence, there have been calls to celebrate such things as “femininity” and “feminine values” within the literature. I’ve discussed the following examples in “Is Ecofeminism Feminist?” (Davion 1994). Ariel Kay Salleh says the following:

if women’s lived experience were recognized as meaningful and were given legitimation in our culture, it would provide an immediate “living” social basis for alternative consciousness which the deep ecologist is trying to formulate and introduce as an abstract ethical construct. Women already, to borrow Devall’s turn of phrase, “flow with the system of nature.” (1984, p. 340)

According to Salleh, we do not need abstract ethical constructs to help create a consciousness of our connection with the rest of nature; women already have it. We need to recognize the value of women’s experiences, something which patriarchal societies fail to do.

Brian Swimme says the following in praise of women’s intuition:

Starhawk intuitively what remained beyond the group of the scientists. Our universe is quite clearly a great swelling and birthing event, but why was this
hidden from the very discoverers of the primate birth? The further truth of the universe was closed to them because central regions of the mind were closed. . . . This sentence is awake in Starhawk because of her life as a woman, as one who has the power to give birth herself, and because of her work as a scholar. . . . Women are beings who know from the inside out what it is like to weave the earth into a new human being. Given that experience and the congruent sensitivities stemming within body and mind, it would be utterly shocking if ecofeminists did not bring forth meanings to the scientific data that were hidden from the scientists themselves.

Swimme claims there is some truth to the idea that the earth is a birthing process, but this truth can only be seen, in fact, effortlessly intuited by women. Swimme seems unsure whether this epistemic privilege is the result of biology, socialization, or both. He refers both to Starhawk’s life as a woman, and to the fact that she is a being who can give birth.

Vandana Shiva also adopts an uncritical standpoint epistemology:

In contemporary times, Third World Women, whose minds have not yet been dispossessed or colonized, are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of. . . . Third World women and those tribes and peasants who have been left out of the process of maldevelopment, are today acting as the intellectual gene pools of ecological categories of thought and action. Marginalization has thus become a source for healing the diseased mainstream of patriarchal development. (1990, p. 46)

Certainly the voices of those suffering, whoever they are, must be central to any ecological feminist ethic. Warren (1990) and Plumwood (1993) make this point as well. However, we need to be careful about saying that suffering oppression makes one a source for healing the diseased mainstream. It is a key feminist position that oppression is wrong, and one of the reasons it is wrong is that it is damaging to those who suffer it. While the voices and experiences of the oppressed will be central to any liberatory movement, uncritical glorification is dangerous. It fails to acknowledge the complexity of oppression. Questions of the merits of standpoint epistemology are central to the development of ecological feminism.

Finally, Shiva’s discussion appears to glorify or romanticize supposedly pre-patriarchal times. She implies that sexism came along with western development. However, in her discussion of the dowry system, she argues that development caused women’s work to be seen as less valuable, thus it increased the amounts of money families needed to come up with in order to marry off women. Development may have made the situation worse, but the dowry system was in place prior to western attempts at development. And this seems like an important factor in understanding sexism in India. A tendency to glorify and romanticize certain groups as having been “pure” before contact with what is now being called western patriarchy is clearly present here and in other ecofeminist work.

I have argued (1994) that positions such as these are problematic in that they appear to accept in an wholesale manner gender roles as constructed under patriarchy.

Yet, a feminist analysis must pay attention to the ways that patriarchy is damaging to women, rather than simply celebrating what has been devalued.

Positions such as those discussed above have been among the reasons for one of the most common criticisms of ecological feminism from feminists and others—the charge of essentialism. The basic criticism is that ecological feminists tend to refer to "woman" and "nature" as if they are metaphysically real categories with essential qualities. Thus, in discussing the category "woman," it is assumed that individual women of different racial, class, and cultural identities fit into the category unproblematically, and, therefore, that they share some essential attribute. The category "nature" is also dealt with as if it is static, real, metaphysically given, and unproblematic. Clearly, many ecological feminist positions seem to use essentialist notions of "woman" and "nature." Some critics, such as Janet Biehl (1991), dismiss ecological feminism altogether because of such charges. This is unfortunate for several reasons. First, it is not the case that all ecological feminist positions are guilty of essentialism, and second, even in cases when there is some basis to the charges of essentialism, we can learn more by examining in greater depth the reasoning behind such positions rather than refusing to engage with them altogether.

Warren (1990) states that ecological feminists agree that women are identified with nature, and that whatever is identified with nature is seen as inferior to whatever is identified with the "human" in western patriarchal contexts. Yet she correctly points out that ecological feminists differ with respect to the truth of the identification of women and nature. Because many ecological feminists are anxious to deny any ahistorical identification of women with nature, they deny the claim that women are identified with nature as anything more than a historical claim about assumptions within patriarchal culture.

In addition, even when it is claimed that women are closer to nature, this is rarely a claim about women’s immutable essence. It is more often a claim about their socialization within patriarchy. When this is the case, the problem is about making false generalizations about all women, generalizations which are insensitive to racial, class, cultural, ethnic, social, and other differences between women. This is certainly problematic, but it is not the same as attributing ahistorical essences.

Some anti-essentialist critics seem to think merely referring to the categories of "woman" and "nature" is problematic, because nothing fits into these categories unproblematically, and to refer to such categories is to promote the idea of such unproblematic fits. If this were the case, ecological feminism would indeed be a dead end. One cannot examine links between oppressions of women and nature if one cannot even refer to these categories. However, Cuomo argues that simply dismissing the logic of nature as the result of patriarchal relations is incorrect.

"Woman" and "nature" get written and interwoven, and the ways cultural constructions, practices, and biological matter are formed and reformed” (1998, p. 206). And it will be impossible to look at how being associated with the natural affects the lives of people who are poor, of color, women, without referring to the discursive categories of "woman" and "nature."
Thus, while some ecological feminists are guilty of essentialism, and perhaps even more are guilty of false generalization, these are certainly not essential or necessary characteristics of ecological feminist analysis. And to claim that they are is to commit essentialism or false generalization. An ecological feminism that examines who gets labeled in certain ways, and how those labels affect one’s prospects for a decent life, is certainly possible, and at least some ecological feminists are attempting it.

I shall conclude by attempting to situate ecological feminism in relation to other traditional and radical approaches to environmental ethics.

**Mainstream approaches**

Mainstream approaches to environmental philosophy can be divided into two basic categories, those that argue for environmental protection based on the instrumental value of the environment, and those that seek to extend intrinsic moral value to at least some non-human entities (see **normative ethics**, **meta-ethics**). Well-known examples of environmentalists arguing for environmental protection based on its instrumental value to human beings include people such as John Muir (1838–1914). These works attempt to demonstrate the importance of environmental health and integrity for human flourishing. Ecological feminists criticize these approaches for such things as their replication of nature/culture dualisms, and the failure to question anthropocentrism, including its androcentric elements. An example of an influential mainstream approach attempting to extend moral consideration to non-human animals is offered by Peter Singer (1975), who argues that certain non-human animals should be accorded moral value using a utilitarian approach, claiming that any being who can suffer deserves moral consideration (see **sentientism**). Theories such as Singer’s can be characterized as extensionist, attempting to extend traditional ethical theories to non-human beings. Extensionist-type theories have been criticized by ecological feminists and others for failing to question liberal conceptions of the human self as fundamentally an atomistic individual whose personal experiences and freedom are the key ethical considerations. Liberal conceptions of the self start with the idea that atomistic human individuals are the paradigm example of beings with moral value and then argue that at least some animals possess the qualities which account for individual human moral value. While ecological feminists argue for the extension of moral value to include non-humans, ecological feminists insist that an adequate environmental ethic must include a reconstruction of what it means to be a human being, and of what criteria are necessary for the recognition of moral value to begin with.

Another common criticism of mainstream approaches is that they tend to separate issues of environmental ethics from questions of inter-human ethics which makes impossible discussions such as the one about the ethics of poultry processing. For example, Cuomo is critical of Singer’s opening statement in *Animal Liberation*. Singer states: “Discrimination on the basis of sex, was said to be the last form of discrimination that is universally accepted and practiced without pretense, even in those liberal circles which have long prided themselves on their freedom from prejudice against racial minorities” (quoted in Cuomo 1998, p. 170). Singer, of course, argues that while these other discriminations are no longer seen as tolerable, discrimination against non-human animals is. However, not only is Singer wrong in stating that racism and sexism are intolerable in today’s America, his assumption that they have disappeared makes it impossible for him to construct a social critique, such as Adams’s, which shows how racism and sexism are linked with animal exploitation.

**Social ecology and deep ecology**

More so-called “radical” approaches such as deep ecology and social ecology join ecological feminists in their charge that mainstream views accept problematic assumptions about what it is to be human. Some ecological feminists also identify themselves as deep ecologists or social ecologists, seeing these as consistent approaches. Social ecology combines anarchist critiques of social hierarchies with an ethic that calls for recognition of the interdependence between humans and other parts of nature. Those ecological feminists identifying themselves as social ecological feminists do so in order to indicate their commitment to the anarchist critiques found in social ecology. For example, Ynestra King did some of her earliest ecofeminist work at the Institute for Social Ecology, founded by one of the leading social ecologists, Murray Bookchin. However, some ecological feminists have been critical of Bookchin’s work in particular, because it seems to hold that humans are superior to the rest of nature because of our rationality. Plumwood (1993), for instance, is disturbed by Bookchin’s acceptance of enlightenment notions of rationality.

**Deep ecology**, a movement founded by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973), is based on the principles of biocentric egalitarianism and self-realization. Biocentric equality is the principle that all things in nature have equal value, and is thus supposed to be radically non-anthropocentric. Self-realization, seeing oneself as part of a larger whole as opposed to a radically separate and egoistic being, is said to challenge dualistic thinking and our deepest assumptions of what it is to be human. According to Naess, we can reach higher levels of being through a process of deep questioning, a kind of spiritual journey ending in an ecologically conscious self. Both social ecologists and ecological feminists have criticized deep ecology for its abstract approaches and for its failure to offer any in-depth critique of how problematic social hierarchies within human society are part of environmental problems.

Some deep ecologists, such as Warwick Fox and Michael E. Zimmerman, have argued that the two basic principles of deep ecology, biocentric egalitarianism and self-realization, can subsume the concerns of ecological feminism (Slicer 1995). These two principles together are said to make the theoretical framework of deep ecology anti-hierarchical, which includes anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, and anti-spezist. However, many ecological feminists resist this, arguing that deep ecology fails to pay adequate attention to inter-human oppression, domination, and exploitation. Thus, some ecofeminists argue that deep ecology’s non-anthropocentrism is superficial, and that the notion of self-realization is both vague and masculinist. Finally, some ecological feminists object to the lack of attention to ecological feminism by deep ecologists, by inaccurate and overly broad characterizations of ecological feminism, and that deep ecologists have tended to refer to men writing about ecological feminism when most of the writings on the topic are by women. In referring to an essay by Fox on the debate between ecological feminism and deep ecology, Deborah Slicer says, “I have this sort of experience each time I read the essay by Fox, who is having a
conversation with Zimmerman and [Jim] Cheney while the women stand gagged in the footnotes” (1995, p. 153). I shall now examine the claim that deep ecology can subsume ecological feminism, and some ecological feminist responses.

Warwick Fox writes, “In accordance with this extremely broad ecocentric egalitarianism, supporters of deep ecology hold that their concerns . . . well and truly subsume the concerns of those movements that have restricted their focus to the attainment of a more egalitarian human society” (quoted in Slicer 1995, p. 53). However, as Slicer, among others, notes, ecological feminists argue that the gender-neutral analysis provided by deep ecologists overlooks androcentrism embedded in the western notion of “human.” Fox maintains that the central disagreement between deep ecology and ecological feminism involves whether androcentrism or anthropocentrism should be given logical, historical, or political priority. But this reveals a lack of attention to a large body of ecological feminist writings which argue that anthropocentrism is part of androcentrism and vice versa.

Posing the question as one of priority, as an either/or question, as Fox so clearly does, misses the point altogether. An accurate understanding of ecological feminist concerns over the intersections of various types of oppression notices that the “anthropocentrism,” which is supposedly the pillar of a system giving human beings moral priority over everything else, is in reality not only sexist, but racist, classist, and homophobic, protecting the moral rights of what tends to be a privileged class of usually white, usually middle-class to wealthy, usually heterosexual, usually men.

Ecological feminists also have been concerned with the concept of self-realization that deep ecologists offer as the solution to dualistic thinking which constructs the human self as radically different and in opposition to the rest of nature. Ecological feminists, including Cheney and Plumwood, argue that the ideal of self-realization offered by deep ecology is problematic.

Plumwood (1993) argues that deep ecological solutions to the discontinuity problem are themselves problematic. The discontinuity problem is that in western contexts humans tend to see themselves as discontinuous with the rest of nature. Deep ecologists offer the notion of self-realization as a solution. However, Plumwood maintains that the notion of self-in-selves is vague, and deep ecologists slide between at least three different meanings — the indistinguishable self, the expanded self, and the transcended self. She believes not only that sliding between these makes accounts imprecise, but also that all three are basically masculinist.

The indistinguishability account of self obliterates the self/other dichotomy. According to Plumwood, John Seed accurately expresses this idea as follows: “I am protecting the rain forest” becomes “I am part of the rain forest protecting myself. I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into thinking” (in Plumwood, 1993, p. 177). Plumwood is critical of self-merger theories, and holds that such obliteration fails to recognize and respect differences. Failure to see oneself as distinct from others means an inability to separate the well-being of others from one’s own well-being. This can easily lead to a failure to pay attention to the needs of others, and a failure to care about those needs. The expanded conception of self has similar difficulties according to Plumwood. In this version, identification becomes not identity, but something more like empathy. Plumwood uses Naess’s articulation of this version: “The self is as comprehensive as the totality of our identifications . . . Our self is that with which we identify” (Plumwood 1993, p. 179). Plumwood points out that the expanded self is not a critique of egoism, it is simply another expression of it. Rather than questioning the structures of possessive egoism and self-interest, it tries to expand the notion of self-interest to include more interests. Thus, we end up with an atomistic non-relational self, just a bigger one. The transcended self account suggests that we detach from the particular concerns of the self. On this account we are to strive for impartial identification with all particulars, the cosmos, and disregard our identifications with our own particular concerns, emotions, and attachments. Plumwood argues that this account again deviates particular attachments, and subsumes the “emotional” to the “rational” in ways that are common in western ethical frameworks, and thus promotes the problematic reason/emotion dualism.

Hence, many ecological feminists not only argue that the account of anthropocentrism offered by deep ecologists is shallow, they argue that deep ecologists incorporate androcentric elements into their suggestions for change. Therefore, many ecological feminists argue that not only does deep ecology fail to address anthropocentrism, it ends up promoting it.

In my opinion, the lack of explicit attention to issues such as sexism and racism in deep ecology means that even if it turns out to be true that on some highly abstract level the principles of biocentric equality and self-realization could subsume ecological feminist concerns, ecological feminists have good reasons to resist this when deep ecologists include sexism on a long list of things they are against, but never get around to dealing with in any detail. Instead of debating whether deep ecology can theoretically address sexism, a better approach would be for deep ecologists actually to address it.

**Some future hopes for ecofeminism**

This brings me to my final point. Sharmara Shantu Riley calls for a strong Afrocentric ecofeminism to link issues of environmental exploitation and issues of gender, race, and class in the United States and in Africa. Her analysis includes a critique of what she calls Eurocentric masculinist ideology, including dualistic thinking. She states: “Because nature—culture dualism conceives of nature as an other that (male) human undertakings transcend and conquer, women, non-human nature, and men of color become symbolically linked in Eurocentric masculinist ideology” (1993, p. 195). This may sound a lot like ecological feminist analysis. However, Riley quite specifically rejects the label ecological feminist.

There are several differences between ecofeminism and Afrocentric ecofeminism. While Afrocentric ecofeminism also articulates the links between male supremacy and environmental degradation, it lays far more stress on other distinctive features, such as race and class, that leave an impression markedly different from many ecofeminist theories.

Many ecofeminists when analyzing links between human relations and ecological degradation, give primacy to gender and thus fall to thoroughly incorporate (as opposed to more tokenism) the historical links between classism, white supremacy, and environmental degradation in their perspectives. For instance, they often don’t
address the fact that in nations where such variables as ethnicity and class are a central organizing principle of society, many women are not only viewed in opposition to men under dualism, but also to other women. (Ibid., p. 197)

One possible ecological feminist response (which to my knowledge has not been made) could be that ecological feminism can subsume Afrocentric ecowomanism because being opposed to logics of domination implies a conceptual commitment to address issues of race and class. However, this would be an awful response. My hope is that we never see a debate over whether ecological feminism can subsume Afrocentric ecowomanism. A more appropriate response would be for those identifying as ecological feminists to pay attention to Afrocentric ecowomanism to see what can be learned. Opening a dialogue means opening up possibilities for coalition-building and doing activist work. A common theme in ecological feminist scholarship is the desire to combine ecologicalist theory with strong ecologist activism. Arguing over whether one theory can, at an abstract level, subsume another, diverts energy away from this. Therefore, it is counterproductive to ecological feminism’s commitment to activism. Riley does not argue that it is somehow theoretically impossible for ecological feminism to attend to issues of race and class. She states that she does not see this actually being done. In my opinion, some of the latest work in ecological feminism pays closer attention to these issues, a trend that will, I hope, continue, and do so without making any attempt to subsume other approaches.

References

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