CHAPTER 3

Ecocentrism Explained and Defended

INTRODUCTION

So far, I have been concerned to distinguish a general ecocentric approach from the other major streams of modern environmentalism identified in chapter 2, namely, resource conservation, human welfare ecology, preservatism, and animal liberation. It still remains to explore the theoretical framework of ecocentrism in a little more detail and address some of the common criticisms and misunderstandings that are often levelled against, or associated with, a general ecocentric perspective. I will also use this opportunity to compare and discuss three distinctive types of ecocentrism within the Western tradition: autopoietic intrinsic value theory, transpersonal ecology, and ecofeminism.

ECOCENTRISM EXPLAINED

Ecocentrism is based on an ecologically informed philosophy of internal relatedness, according to which all organisms are not simply interrelated with their environment but also constituted by those very environmental interrelationships. According to Birch and Cobb, it is more accurate to think of the world in terms of "events" or "societies of events" rather than "substances":

Events are primary, and substantial objects are to be viewed as enduring patterns among changing events.... The ecological model is a model of internal relations. No event first occurs and then relates to its world. The event is a synthesis of relations to other events.2

According to this picture of reality, the world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman. This model of reality undermines anthropocentrism insofar as whatever faculty we
choose to underscore our own uniqueness or specialness as the basis of our moral superiority (e.g., rationality, language, or our tool-making capability), we will invariably find either that there are some humans who do not possess such a faculty or that there are some nonhumans who do. Nonanthropocentric ethical theorists have used this absence of any rigid, absolute dividing line between humans and nonhumans to point out the logical inconsistency of conventional anthropocentric ethical and political theory that purports to justify the exclusive moral consideration of humans on the basis of our separateness from, say, the rest of the animal world. Indeed, we saw in the previous chapter how Peter Singer used this kind of argument to criticize human-centered ethical theory and defend animal liberation. While there are undoubtedly many important differences in degree (as distinct from kind) between all or some humans and nonhumans, as Fox points out, this cuts both ways; for example, there are countless things that other animals do better than us.4 (And there are also innumerable differences in capacities that separate nonhuman life-forms from each another.) From an ecocentric perspective, to single out only our special attributes as the basis of our exclusive moral consideration is simply human chauvinism that conveniently fails to recognize the special attributes of other life-forms: it assumes that what is distinctive about humans is more worthy than, rather than simply different from, the distinctive features of other life-forms.5 John Rodman has called this the “differential imperative,” that is, the selection of what humans do best (as compared to other species) as the measure of human virtue and superiority over other species. Rodman traces this idea in Western thought as far back as Socrates, who saw the most virtuous human as “the one who most fully transcends their animal and vegetative nature.”6 The upshot, of course, is that one becomes a better human if one reinforces the differential imperative by maximizing one’s “species-specific difference.” (Moreover, as Benton points out, the putative human/animal opposition may sometimes be seen as serving “as a convenient symbolic device whereby we have attributed to animals the dispositions we have not been able to contemplate in ourselves.”)7

Ecocentric theorists have also pointed out how new scientific discoveries have served to challenge long standing anthropocentric prejudices. As the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions have shown, scientific discoveries can have a dramatic impact on popular conceptions of, and orientations toward, nature. This is not to argue that science can or ought to determine ethics or politics but merely to acknowledge that in modern times the credibility of any Western philosophical worldview is seriously compromised if it is not at least cognizant of, and broadly consistent with, current scientific knowledge. It is indeed ironic that while an ecocentric orientation is often wrongly criticized for resting on an “anti-science,” mystical idealization of nature, many proponents of ecocentrism are quick to point out that the philo-
sophical premises of ecocentrism (i.e., the model of internal relations) are actually more consistent with modern science than the premises of anthropocentrism, which posit humans as either separate from and above the rest of nature (or if not separate from the rest of nature then nonetheless the acme of evolution). In this respect, ecocentric theorists, far from being anti-science, often enlist science to help undermine deeply ingrained anthropocentric assumptions that have found their way into many branches of the social sciences and humanities, including modern political theory. As George Sessions has argued, modern science has “been the single most decisive non-anthropocentric intellectual force in the Western world.”8 Indeed, it has been the mechanistic, materialistic worldview of the Enlightenment (which has shaped so much modern political theory) that has most come under challenge by these new scientific discoveries. Just as the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions helped to undermine the Judeo-Christian, medieval worldview of the “great chain of being” (according to which all life-forms were fixed in a static hierarchy with humans standing above the beasts and below the angels), the picture of ecological and subatomic reality that has emerged from new discoveries in biology and physics has now made inroads into many of the assumptions of the Newtonian worldview.9 The most pervasive of these are technological optimism—the confident belief that with further scientific research we can rationally manage (i.e., predict, manipulate, and control) all the negative unintended consequences of large-scale human interventions in nature; atomism—the idea that nature is made up of discrete building blocks and that the observer is therefore completely separate from the observed; and anthropocentrism—the belief that there is a clear and morally relevant dividing line between humankind and the rest of nature, that humankind is the only or principal source of value and meaning in the world, and that nonhuman nature is there for no other purpose but to serve humankind.10

Clearly, ecocentric theorists are not against science or technology per se; rather they are against scientism (i.e., the conviction that empirical-analytic science is the only valid way of knowing) and technocentrism (i.e., anthropocentric technological optimism). The distinction is crucial. Indeed, many ecocentric theorists are keenly interested in the history and philosophy of science and are fond of pointing out the reciprocal interplay between dominant images of nature (whether derived from science, philosophy, or religion) and dominant images of society.11 This mutual reinforcement is reflected in the resonance between medieval Christian cosmology and the medieval political order (both of which emphasized a hierarchy of being) and between the Newtonian worldview and the rise of modern liberal democracy (both of which emphasized atomism). Ecocentric theorists are now drawing attention to what Fox has referred to as the “structural similarity” between the ecological model of internal relatedness and the picture of reality that has emerged in modern biology.
and physics, although it is too early to say what the societal implications of these developments might be. Unlike Capra, I see nothing inevitable about the possibility of a new, ecologically informed cultural transformation, although there are certainly many exciting possibilities "in the wind."\textsuperscript{13}

The structural similarity between the ecological model of internal relatedness that informs ecocentrism and the picture of reality delivered to us by certain branches of modern science is, of course, no substitute for an ethical and political justification of an eocentric perspective (although it does serve to undermine the opposing perspective of anthropocentrism). As I noted earlier, in modern times general consistency with science is merely a necessary—as distinct from a sufficient—condition for the acceptance of an alternative philosophical worldview in the West. In this respect, I agree with Michael Zimmerman's observations concerning the relevance of science to environmental ethics and politics: that it may help to inspire and prepare the ground for a new orientation toward nature and "give humanity prudential reasons for treating the biosphere with more care" but that "a change in scientific understanding alone cannot produce the needed change of consciousness."\textsuperscript{14} It is no argument, then, simply to appeal to the authority of nature as a justification for a particular political worldview. It is, on the other hand, perfectly reasonable to question an opposing worldview on the ground that the assumptions on which it is based have been shown by science to be erroneous.

The eco-centric recognition of the interrelatedness of all phenomena together with its prima facie orientation of inclusiveness of all beings means that it is far more protective of the Earth's life-support system than an anthropocentric perspective. As Michael Zimmerman has argued in addressing the practical consequences of an anthropocentric perspective:

If humankind is understood as the goal of history, the source of all value, the pinnacle of evolution, and so forth, then it is not difficult for humans to justify the plundering of the natural world, which is not human and therefore "valueless."\textsuperscript{15}

When anthropocentric assumptions of this kind are combined with a powerful technology, the capacity for environmental destruction increases dramatically.

Anthropocentrism of this extreme kind may be seen as a kind of ecological myopia or unenlightened self-interest that is blind to the ecological circularities between the self and the external world, with the result that it leads to the perpetuation of unintended and unforeseen ecological damage. An eocentric perspective, in contrast, recognizes that nature is not only more complex than we presently know but also quite possibly more complex, in principle, than we can know—an insight that has been borne out in the rapidly expanding field of chaos theory.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the anthropocentric resource conservation and human welfare ecology streams of environmentalism adopt a general ethic of prudence and caution based on an ecologically enlightened self-interest, they differ from an eocentric perspective in that they see the ecological tragedy as essentially a human one. Those belonging to the eocentric stream, on the other hand, see the tragedy as both human and nonhuman. This is because a thoroughgoing eocentric perspective is one that, "within obvious kinds of practical limits, allows all entities (including humans) the freedom to unfold in their own way unhindered by the various forms of human domination."\textsuperscript{17} Such a general perspective may be seen as seeking "emancipation with large." In accord with ontological primacy to the internal relatedness of all phenomena, an eocentric perspective adopts an "existential attitude of mutuality" in recognition of the fact that one's personal fulfillment is inextricably tied up with that of others.\textsuperscript{18} This is not seen as a resignation or self-sacrifice but rather as a positive affirmation of the fact of our embeddedness in ecological relationships.

The ecological model of internal relatedness upon which eco-centricism rests applies not only in respect of human-nonhuman relations but also in respect of relations among humans: in a biological, psychological, and social sense we are all constituted by our interrelationships between other humans, and our political, economic, and cultural institutions. As Birch and Cobb emphasize, we do not exist as separate entities and then enter into these relations. From the moment we are born, we are constituted by, and coevolve within the context of, such relations.\textsuperscript{19} According to this model, we are neither completely passive and determined beings (as crude behaviorists would have it) nor completely autonomous and self-determining beings (as some existentialists would have it). Rather, we are relatively autonomous beings who, by our purposive thought and action, help to constitute the very relations that determine who we are.\textsuperscript{20} Of course, this kind of social interactionist model is hardly new to the social sciences. For example, in social psychology it is found in the theories of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. In political philosophy a similar social model is implicit in the many communitarian and socialist political philosophies that seek the mutual self-realization of all in preference to the individual self-realization of some. This helps to explain why there is a much greater elective affinity—and hence a much greater potential for theoretical synthesis—between eco-centricism and communitarian and socialist political philosophies than there is between eco-centricism and individualistic political philosophies such as liberalism, as we saw in chapter 1. Eco-centric political theorists have generally discarded what Callicott has aptly described as "the threadbare metaphysical cloth from which classical utilitarianism [and, I would add, Lockeian liberalism] is cut." This is because, as Callicott puts it,

Utilitarianism [indeed liberalism in general] assumes a radical individualism or rank social atomism completely at odds with the relational sense of self that is consistent with a more fully informed
evolutionary and ecological understanding of terrestrial and human nature.  

It should be clear, however, that ecocentric theorists are not seeking to discard the central value of autonomy in Western political thought and replace it with something completely new. Rather, ecocentric theorists are merely concerned to revise the notion of autonomy and incorporate it into a broader, ecological framework.

The word autonomy is derived from the Greek autos (self) and nomos (law) and means, literally, to live by one’s own laws. This is similar to Immanuel Kant’s influential formulation according to which an autonomous person is someone who acts from self-imposed principle (as distinct from personal whim or externally imposed commands). Ecocentric theorists have carried forward this basic notion of autonomy as self-determination. However, they have extended the interpretation and application of the notion by radically revising the notion of “self.” After all, if we take autonomy to mean self-determination, this still begs the question as to what kind of “self” we are addressing. In lieu of the atomistic and individualistic self of liberalism or the more social self of socialism, ecocentric theorists have introduced a broader, ecological notion of self that incorporates all individual and social aspects in a more encompassing framework. From the perspective of the ecological model of internal relations, the liberal idea of autonomy as independence from (or “freedom from”) others is seen as philosophically misguided. (To the extent that interconnectedness with others is acknowledged under this particular liberal interpretation, it is likely to be experienced as threatening, as causing a loss of self). While socialists tend to adopt a more relational model of self (which sometimes encompasses our relations with the nonhuman world), this still remains embedded in an anthropocentric framework.

Of course, the ecocentric reformulation of autonomy does not mean that the boundary between one’s individual self and others completely falls away. Rather, the reformulation merely seeks to emphasize the flexible or soft nature of the boundaries between self and other (which is why ecocentric theorists often refer to the individual self as forming part of a “larger self”). Evelyn Fox Keller encapsulates the permeable nature of the boundaries between self and other in her concept of “dynamic autonomy.” As Keller explains, this dynamic concept of autonomy “is a product at least as much of relatedness as it is of delineation; neither is prior.” From an ecocentric perspective, the exercise of dynamic autonomy requires psychological maturity and involves a sensitive mediation between one’s individual self and the larger whole. This does not mean having control over others but rather means having a sense of competent agency in the world in the context of an experience of continuity with others. In contrast, the quest for radical inde-

pendence from others, or power over others, leads to an objectification of others, and a denial of their own modes of relative autonomy or subjectivity.

What is new about an ecocentric perspective (and Keller shares this perspective) is that it extends the notion of autonomy (and the interactionist model of internal relations on which it is based) to a broader and more encompassing pattern of layered interrelationships that extend beyond personal and societal relations to include relations with the rest of the biotic community. This means that the nonhuman world is no longer posited simply as the background or means to the self-determination of individuals or political communities, as is the case in most modern political theorizing. Rather, the different members of the nonhuman community are also appreciated as important in their own terms, as having their own (varying degrees of) relative autonomy and their own modes of being. The implications of applying this expanded model of internal relations to social and political thought are far reaching. As Zimmerman has put it, “the paradigm of internal relations lets us view ourselves as manifestations of a complex universe; we are apart but are moments in the openended, novelty-producing process of cosmic evolution.”

Some Common Criticisms and Misunderstandings

Ecocentrism’s challenge to cultural and political orthodoxy has been widely resisted and misunderstood by critics for a variety of reasons: that it is impossible, misanthropic (or at least insulting to some humans, notably the oppressed), impractical, and/or based on an all too convenient idealization of nature. Some resistance is, of course, to be expected of a perspective that, as George Sessions has put it, is mounting a philosophical challenge to “the pervasive metaphysical and ethical anthropocentrism that has dominated Western culture with classical Greek humanism and the Judeo-Christian tradition since its inception.” But is such resistance warranted? In the remainder of this section I address five common objections that have contributed to this resistance to ecocentrism.

One common criticism is that it is impossible to perceive the world other than from an anthropocentric perspective since we are, after all, human subjects. This criticism, however, entirely misses the point of the critique of anthropocentrism by conflating the identity of the perceiving subject with the content of what is perceived and valued, a confutation that Fox has called the “anthropocentric fallacy.” In particular, this kind of understanding conflates the trivial and tautological sense of the term anthropocentrism (i.e., that we can only ever perceive the world as human subjects—who can argue against this?) and the substantive and informative sense of the term (the unwarranted, differential treatment of other beings on the basis that they do not belong to our own species). Ecocentric theorists are not claiming that
we must, or indeed can, know exactly what it is like to be, say, a kangaroo (although there are meditation traditions and forms of shamanic journeying that enable humans to experience the world as other beings). As Barbara Noske explains, "there is a sense in which we cannot know the Other (whether it be other species, other cultures, the other sex or even each other) [now] we must remind ourselves that other meanings exist, even if we may be severely limited in our understanding of them." As Fox points out, to say that humans cannot be nonanthropocentric is like saying that a male cannot be nonsexist or that a white person cannot be nonracist because they can only perceive the world as male or white subjects. This understanding ignores the fact that males and whites are quite capable of cultivating a nonsexist or nonracist consciousness or, in this case, that humans are quite capable of cultivating a nonanthropocentric consciousness.

A second misconception of ecocentrism is to interpret its sustained critique of anthropocentrism as anti-human and/or as displaying an insensitivity to the needs of the poor and the oppressed by collectively blaming the human species as a whole for the ecological crisis (rather than singling out specific nations, groups, or classes). However, this criticism fails to appreciate the clear distinction between a nonanthropocentric and a misanthropic perspective. Ecocentrism is not against humans per se or the celebration of humanity's special forms of excellence; rather, it is against the ideology of human supremacy. Ecocentric theorists see each human individual and each human culture as just as entitled to live and blossom as any other species, provided they do so in a way that is sensitive to the needs of other human individuals, communities, and cultures, and other life-forms generally. Moreover, many critics of ecocentrism fail to realize that a perspective that seeks emancipation writ large is one that necessarily supports social justice in the human community. Given that it is patently the case that not all humans are implicated in ecological destruction to the same degree, then it follows that ecocentric theorists would not expect the costs of environmental reform to be borne equally by all classes and nations, regardless of relative wealth or privilege. That many ecocentric theorists have given special theoretical attention to human-nonhuman relations arises from the fact that these relations are so often neglected by theorists in the humanities and social sciences. It does not arise from any lack of concern or lack of theoretical inclusiveness with regard to human emancipatory struggles.

Before leaving this point, it should be noted that some ecophilosophically minded writers (e.g., David Ehrenfeld in The Arrogance of Humanism) have been critical of humanism in general, rather than just anthropocentrism. This can be misleading, however, since humanism does not represent one single idea, such as human self-importance or the celebration of humanity as the sole and sufficient source of value and inspiration in the world, although these have been central ideas in humanism and are the main bone of contention of nonanthropocentric ecophilosophers. Rather, humanism is a complex tapestry of ideas, many strands of which are anthropocentric, yet some strands of which remain worthwhile and consistent with an ecocentric perspective. As Blackham explains, "the 'open mind,' the 'open society,' and the sciences and 'humanities' are the glory of humanism and at the same time a widely shared inheritance." In view of this, it is more to the point simply to criticize the many anthropocentric assumptions embedded in our humanist heritage rather than to equate anthropocentrism with humanism and thereby condemn humanism in its entirety.

A third criticism is that ecocentrism is a passive and quietistic perspective that regards humans as no more valuable than, say, ants or the AIDS virus. However, ecocentrism merely seeks to cultivate a prima facie orientation of nonfavoritism; it does not mean that humans cannot or ought not to defend themselves or others (including other threatened species) from danger or life-threatening diseases. In this respect, the degree of sentience of an organism and its degree of self-consciousness and capacity for richness of experience are relevant factors (as distinct from exclusive criteria) in any ethical choice situation alongside other factors, such as whether a particular species is endangered or whether a particular population is crucial to the maintenance of a particular ecosystem. A nonanthropocentric perspective is one that ensures that the interests of nonhuman species and ecological communities (of varying levels of aggregation) are not ignored in human decision making simply because they are not human or because they are not of instrumental value to humans. It does not follow from this prima facie orientation of nonfavoritism, however, that the actual outcome of human decision making must necessarily favor noninterference with other life-forms. Humans are just as entitled to live and blossom as any other species, and this inevitably necessitates some killing of, suffering by, and interference with, the lives and habitats of other species. When faced with a choice, however, those who adopt an ecocentric perspective will seek to choose the course that will minimize such harm and maximize the opportunity of the widest range of organisms and communities—including ourselves—to flourish in their own way. This is encapsulated in the popular slogan "live simply so that others [both human and nonhuman] may simply live."

A fourth criticism against ecocentrism is that it is difficult to translate into social, political, and legal practice. How, many sceptics ask, can we ascribe rights to nonhumans when they cannot reciprocate? My primary answer to this kind of criticism is that it is neither necessary nor ultimately desirable that we ascribe legal rights to nonhuman entities to ensure their protection. However, it also needs to be pointed out that there is no a priori reason why legal rights cannot be ascribed to nonhuman entities. As Christopher Stone has argued, the idea of conferring legal rights on nonhumans is not "unthinkable" when it is remembered that legal rights are conferred on
“nonspeaking” persons such as infants and fetuses, on legal fictions such as corporations, municipalities and trusts, and on entities such as churches and nation states. Given that there is no common thread or principle running through this anomalous class of right holders, Stone argues that there is no good reason against extending legal rights to natural entities. Stone proposes that the rights of nonhuman entities (or, in his language, “natural objects”) be defended in the same way as “human vegetables,” that is, by the appointment of a Guardian or Friend who would ensure that the natural entity’s interests were protected (e.g., by administering a trust fund and instigating legal actions on its behalf in order to make good any injury inflicted on it). Stone’s proposal may be seen as an even more daring adventure in liberalism than animal liberation insofar as it seeks to provide the means of legally protecting the special interests of nonhuman and nonsentient entities such as forests, rivers, and oceans.

While Stone’s proposals may serve an important educative and protective purpose in respect of nonhuman interests, there is nonetheless an element of absurdity in the notion of extending rights to nonhumans on the basis of a contractarian notion of rights, whereby a right must be accompanied by a correlative duty. Stone appears to lean toward such a view in his suggestion that the trust funds established for the benefit of a natural entity might also be used to satisfy judgments against that entity (e.g., a river might be liable for the damage inflicted by its flooding and destroying crops!) although he admits that such an idea would prove to be troublesome. As Stone asks: “When the Nile overflows, is it the ‘responsibility’ of the river? the mountains? the snow? the hydrological cycle?”38 Stone also canvases the possibility of “an electoral apportionment that made some systematic effort to allow for the representative ‘rights’ of nonhuman life.”39 Of course, the first kind of scenario could be avoided by employing a noncontractarian theory of rights (i.e., as not necessarily entailing reciprocal duties), yet there is still something strained and ungracious in the attempt to extend to the nonhuman world political concepts that have been especially tailored over many centuries to protect human interests. This highlights the need to search for simpler and more elegant ways of enabling the flourishing of a rich and diverse nonhuman world without resorting to the extension to the nonhuman realm of peculiarly human political and legal models such as justice, equality, and rights.40 As John Livingston points out, extending liberal egalitarian ideals in this way “anthropomorphizes the nonhuman world in order to include it in a human ethical code.”41 Similarly, John Rodman has suggested that the “liberation of nature” requires not the extension of human-like rights to nonhumans but the liberation of the nonhuman world from “the status of human resource, human product, human caricature.”42 It is indeed noteworthy that one of the doyens of modern liberal theory—John Rawls—in discussing the limits of his liberal theory of justice, has stated in passing that it does not seem possible to extend the contract doctrine so as to include them [i.e., creatures lacking a capacity for a sense of justice] in a natural way. A correct conception of our relations to animals and to nature would seem to depend [instead] upon a theory of the natural order and our place in it.43

The above reservations concerning the appropriateness of extending legal rights to nonhumans are hardly fatal to ecocentrism; nor do they provide any argument for resorting to anthropocentrism through want of appropriate legal mechanisms. Rather, they emphasize the importance of a general change in consciousness and suggest that a gradual cultural, educational, and social revolution involving a reformulation of our sense of place in the evolutionary drama is likely to provide a better long term protection of the interests of the nonhuman world than a more limited legal revolution of the kind envisaged by Stone. In the short term, the above reservations concerning the applicability of liberal categories to the nonhuman world highlight the need for us to rethink the ways in which we might legally protect the interests of the nonhuman world. Indeed, there are already existing alternative legislative precedents that avoid the language of rights but nonetheless ensure that government departments and courts consider both human and nonhuman interests when administering environmental legislation or adjudicating land-use conflicts.44

Finally, some critics are cynical of ecocentrism because they consider that it interprets nature selectively as something that is essentially harmonious, kindly, and benign (ignoring suffering, unpredictability, and change), thus providing an all too convenient model for human relations. Alternatively, critics have argued that the popular ecological views of some Green thinkers lean toward an idealization of nature or employ outmoded ecological notions (such as the “balance of nature”) that have little to do with the way nature in fact operates.45 My response to these criticisms is that ecocentric theorists simply do not need to depict nature as having a kindly human face or to show that nature is essentially benevolent or benign in order that humans respect it and regard it as worthy. If we try to judge the nonhuman world by human standards as to what is “kindly,” we will invariably find it wanting.46 Nonhuman nature knows no human ethics, it simply is.

In any event, appealing to the authority of nature (as known by ecology) is no substitute for ethical argument.47 Ecological science cannot perform the task of normative justification in respect of an ecocentric political theory because it does not tell us why we ought to orient ourselves toward the world in a particular way. It can inform, inspire, and redirect our ethical and political theorizing, but it cannot justify it. That is the task of ethical and political theory. However, a general familiarity with new developments in science is important to an ecocentric perspective (the employment of outmoded concepts of nature does serve to distract from the force and credibility of ecoso-
li
tical argument). As we have already seen, a general familiarity with new developments in science by social and political theorists can enhance our understanding of the world around us, improve the general grounding and credibility of a political theory, and provide the basis for challenging opposing worldviews on the grounds that the assumptions on which they are based have been shown to be erroneous.

**Three Varieties of Ecocentrism**

Having explained and defended a general ecocentric perspective, it now remains to explore some particular theoretical and cultural expressions of ecocentrism. Indeed, there is a wide range of different approaches that are consistent with a general ecocentric perspective. Examples include axiological (i.e., value theory) approaches that argue for the intrinsic value of all living entities as well as such "systemic" entities as populations, species, ecosystems, and the oecosphere; the psychological-cosmological approach that is being developed under the name of "deep ecology" or, more recently, "transpersonal ecology"; the antihierarchical and personal ethic of care and reciprocity defended by ecofeminism; certain Eastern philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism that emphasize the interconnectedness of all phenomena and the importance of humility and compassion; and the animistic cosmologies of many indigenous peoples who see and respect the nonhuman world as alive and en
spired.

I will explore three complementary expressions of ecocentrism within the Western tradition: autopoietic intrinsic value theory (which I see as an improvement on the popular, ecosystem-based "land ethic" of Aldo Leopold), transpersonal ecology, and ecofeminism. In view of the increasing influence and popularity of both deep/transpersonal ecology and ecofeminism within Green circles, particular attention will be given to clarifying the areas of overlap and difference between these two distinctive ecocentric approaches.

**Autopoietic Intrinsic Value Theory**

Autopoietic intrinsic value theory—outlined by Fox under the name of "autopoietic ethics"—represents one kind of intrinsic value theory approach that is capable of providing a sound theoretical basis for ecocentrism. An autopoietic approach attributes intrinsic value to all entities that display the property of autopoiesis, which means "self-production" or "self-renewal" (from the Greek autos, "self," and poiein, "to produce"). Autopoietic entities are entities that are "primary and continuously concerned with the regeneration of their own organizational activity and structure." It is precisely this characteristic of self-production or self-renewal (as distinct from merely self-organization) that distinguishes living entities from self-correct-

ing machines that appear to operate in a purposive manner (such as guided missiles). In other words, the primary product of the operations of living systems, as distinct from mechanical systems, is themselves, not some goal or task external to themselves. Autopoietic entities are therefore **ends in themselves**, which, as Fox points out, "amounts to the classical formulation of intrinsic value." This means that autopoietic entities (e.g., populations, gene pools, ecosystems, and individual living organisms) are deserving of moral consideration in their own right.

An autopoietic approach provides a sounder theoretical basis for ecocentrism than the ethical holism of Aldo Leopold's famous land ethic, which declares that "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does otherwise." The problem with this ethic, as animal liberation proponents point out, is that it is vulnerable to the charge of "environmental fascism" in that it provides no recognition of the value of individual organisms. This is because, considered on its own, it can be interpreted as suggesting that individuals are dispensable—indeed, might need to be sacrificed for the good of the whole.

An autopoietic approach to intrinsic value is not vulnerable to the objections that are associated with either extreme atomism or extreme holism. Whereas atomistic approaches attribute intrinsic value only to individual organisms, and whereas an unqualified holistic approach attributes intrinsic value only to whole ecosystems (or perhaps only the biosphere or oecosphere itself), an autopoietic approach recognizes the value of all process-structures that "continuously strive to produce and sustain their own organizational activity and structure."

That is, an autopoietic approach recognizes the value not only of individual organisms but also of species, ecosystems, and the oecosphere ("Gaia").

**Transpersonal Ecology**

In contrast to the autopoietic approach, which proceeds via an axiological (i.e., value theory) route, transpersonal ecology proceeds by way of a cosmological and psychological route and is concerned to address the way in which we understand and experience the world. The primary concern of transpersonal ecology is the cultivation of a wider sense of self through the common or everyday psychological process of identification with others. This should not be understood simply as a reformulation of the Kantian Categorical Imperative (i.e., dutiful altruism) or the Golden Rule (i.e., do unto others as you would have others do unto you) since these remain axiological approaches that are concerned with moral obligations that may or may not correspond with one's personal (or "heartfelt") inclinations. In any event, it should be noted here that Kant regarded only humans as ends in themselves. In contrast to axiological approaches, which issue in moral injunctions or a code of conduct (i.e., "you ought to respect other beings, regardless of how you might..."
personally experience them”), transpersonal ecology is concerned to find ways in which we may experience a lived sense of identification with other beings. Indeed, as Fox points out, transpersonal ecology explicitly rejects approaches that issue in moral injunctions and advances instead an approach that seeks “to invite and inspire others to realize, in a this-worldly sense, as expansive a sense of self as possible.”25 As Arne Naess explains, if your sense of self embraces other beings, then “you need no moral exhortation to show care” toward those beings.26 The cultivation of this kind of expansive sense of self means that compassion and empathy naturally flow as part of an individual’s way of being in the world rather than as a duty or obligation that must be performed regardless of one’s personal inclination.27

The transpersonal ecology approach is described as both cosmological and psychological because it proceeds from a particular picture of the world or cosmos—that we are, in effect, all “leaves” on an unfolding “tree of life”—to a psychological identification with all phenomena (i.e., with all leaves on the tree). Fox refers to this approach as transpersonal ecology because it is concerned to cultivate a sense of experience of self that extends beyond one’s egocentric, biographical, or personal sense of self to include all beings.28 This should not be confused with a generalized form of narcissism as this simply involves the projection of one’s ego into a larger sphere (i.e., the self that is revered is still confined to the narrow, egoistic, particle-like sense of self). In contrast, transpersonal ecology (which draws on insights from, among other sources, transpersonal psychology and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi) is addressing a much broader, transpersonal (i.e., trans-egoistic) sense of “ecological self” that embraces other beings (human and nonhuman) and ecological processes. The movement from an atomistic, egocentric sense of self toward an expansive, ecocentric or transpersonal sense of self is seen as representing a process of psychological maturing.29 In other words, transpersonal ecology is concerned to expand the circle of human compassion and respect for others beyond one’s particular family and friends and beyond the human community to include the entire ecological community. The realization of this expansive, ecocentric sense of self is brought about by the process of identification with other beings (i.e., the cultivation of an empathic orientation toward the world) in recognition of the fact that one’s own individual or personal fate is intimately bound up with the fate of others. It is noteworthy that deep/transpersonal ecology theorists provide a sophisticated theoretical articulation of the experience of many environmental activists as revealed in empirical research. As Lester Milbrath found in his sociological survey, “environmentalists, much more than non-environmentalists, have a generalized sense of compassion that extends to other species, to people in remote communities and countries, and to future generations.”30

Some critics might object that this kind of approach attempts to derive an “ought” from an “is,” in that it proceeds from the fact of our interconnect-

dness with the world to a particular kind of normative orientation toward the world. However, transpersonal ecologists do not seek to argue that the fact of our interconnectedness logically implies a caring orientation toward the world (indeed, this fact does not logically imply any kind of normative orientation). Rather, transpersonal ecologists are offering an “experiential invitation” rather than issuing a moral injunction. As Fox explains:

For transpersonal ecologists, given a deep enough understanding of the way things are, the response of being inclined to care for the unfolding of the world in all its aspects follows “naturally”—not as a logical consequence but as a psychological consequence; as an expression of the spontaneous unfolding (development, maturing) of the self.31

The autopoietic intrinsic value theory approach and the transpersonal ecology approach each have different advantages and are appropriate in different contexts. For example, the autopoietic approach is more suitable to translation into legal and political practice than the transpersonal ecology approach. After all, it makes sense to enact legislation that demands the recognition of certain intrinsic values, whereas it makes no sense to enact legislation that demands that people identify more widely with the world around them.32 Indeed, there are already existing legislative precedents that are consistent with an autopoietic intrinsic value theory approach rather than an atomistic intrinsic value approach in that they value for their own sake both individual living organisms as well as entities such as ecosystems.33

The transpersonal ecology approach, in contrast, is more appropriately pursued in the community through educational and cultural activities (although these activities can, of course, be encouraged and financially supported by the state). Transpersonal ecology, in other words, lends itself far more to a “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” approach to social change. Transpersonal ecology may thus be seen as forming part of the vanguard of the cultivation of a new worldview, a new culture and character, and new political horizons that are appropriate to our times. As we saw in chapter 1, this emphasis on cultural renewal and reenvisioning our place in nature forms an essential component of ecocentric emancipatory thought. In this respect, transpersonal ecology may be seen as being more expressive of the cultural aspirations of ecocentric emancipatory thought than an autopoietic intrinsic value theory approach, although the latter is an essential complement. That is, cultural renewal and legislative reform must go hand in hand.

**Ecofeminism**

Like transpersonal ecology, ecofeminism is concerned with our sense of self and the way in which we experience the world rather than with formal value theory. Like transpersonal ecology, ecofeminism also proceeds from a pro-
cess oriented, relational image of nature and seeks mutualistic social and ecological relationships based on a recognition of the interconnectedness, interdependence, and diversity of all phenomena.

However, unlike transpersonal ecology, ecofeminism has taken the historical/symbolic association of women with nature as demonstrating a special convergence of interests between feminism and ecology. The convergence is seen to arise, in part, from the fact that patriarchal culture has located women somewhere between men and the rest of nature on a conceptual hierarchy of being (i.e., God, Man, Woman, Nature). This has enabled ecofeminists to identify what they see as a similar logic of domination between the destruction of nonhuman nature and the oppression of women. Indeed, it is a central claim of many ecofeminists (writing mostly, but not exclusively, from a radical feminist perspective) that "the larger culture's devaluation of natural processes was a product of masculine consciousness." As Simone de Beauvoir observed in her wide-ranging exploration of the "second sex," women—like nonhuman animals—have usually been more preoccupied with the generation and repetition of life, whereas men have usually been free to seek ways of transcending life by remodelling, reshaping, and recreating the future through technology and symbols. Whereas women's activity has usually been perishable, involving "lower level" transformations of nature, men's activity has usually been more lasting, involving major transformations of nature and culture.

Although many feminists have rejected the association of women and nature as burdensome, ecofeminists, while recognizing that the association has been used to oppress women in the past, have nonetheless embraced it as a source of empowerment for women and the basis of a critique of the male domination of women and nonhuman nature. This is an explicitly ecofeminist project because it exposes and celebrates what has traditionally been regarded as Other—both woman and nonhuman nature—in the context of a far-reaching critique of hierarchical dualism and "masculine" culture. Ecofeminists seek to subvert the dominant valuation of what human characteristics and activities are most valuable. This project entails a rejection of many of the "advances" of patriarchal culture and a celebration of the previously undervalued nurturing characteristics of women.

In contrast to the more secular leanings of socialist and liberal feminists, many ecofeminists are vitally interested in cultivating an ecofeminist spirituality, whether it be through retrieving the insights of nonhierarchical pre-Christian cultures or reviving other Earth-based traditional practices (e.g., celebrating the Goddess-oriented culture of Old Europe, pagan rituals, Gaia, the body, natural cycles, and the experience of connectedness and embodiment in general). In this respect, most ecofeminists would have much sympathy with Gary Snyder's sentiment that "our troubles began with the invention of male deities located off the planet." Indeed, both ecofeminist and deep/transpersonal ecology theorists have been particularly critical of the Judeo-Christian heritage. As the ecofeminist theologian Elizabeth Dodson Gray explains, we need to move toward an "embodied ecospirituality" and re-myst Genesis in a way that honors diversity by moving our culture "to a creation-based valuing of all parts of nature." There is a great deal in common between the particular ecological sensibility or sense of self defended by ecofeminists and deep/transpersonal ecologists. Indeed, many ecofeminist insights are indistinguishable from the "wider indentification" approach of transpersonal ecology. For example, Elizabeth Dodson Gray has suggested that the root of the modern ecological crisis is that "we do not understand who we are"; when we realize that we are intimately connected with the larger whole then "what hurts any part of my larger system will hurt me." Notwithstanding these important commonalities, ecofeminism tends to diverge from transpersonal ecology in two significant ways (although these tendencies are far from uniform among different ecofeminist writers). The first relates to the kinds of identification that are emphasized and the kinds of self that identify; the second relates to the kinds of theoretical explanation offered to account for the environmental crisis.

Most ecofeminists emphasize a form of identification with the world that is gender specific and based on, or at least begins with, personal contact and familiarity. Indeed, some ecofeminists have criticized the kind of identification defended by transpersonal ecologists for being abstract, impersonal, and preoccupied with the whole at the expense of the parts. However, these criticisms overlook the fact that the transpersonal ecology approach to identification encompasses the personal by including both the whole and the parts in what Fox describes as an "outside-in" rather than "inside-out" approach. (Indeed, many ecofeminists arrive at a similar position to transpersonal ecology, albeit from an "inside-out" rather than "outside-in" route.) As Fox explains, it is an approach that "proceeds from a sense of the cosmos (such as that provided by the image of the tree of life) and works inward to each particular individual's sense of commonality with other entities." Fox argues that cosmologically based identification represents a more impartial, inclusive, and, hence, more egalitarian approach to identification than does a purely personally based approach, in that it leads one to identify with all of the human and nonhuman world irrespective of one's personal involvement. Moreover, Fox argues that purely personally based forms of identification can lead to excessive partiality, attachment, possessiveness, and parochialism. This does not mean, however, that transpersonal ecologists wish to deny the significance of personally based identification—indeed, Fox acknowledges that this kind of identification is the easiest and most immediate experience of identification available to humans. Rather, transpersonal ecologists simply seek to locate personally based identification in a wider...
social and ecological context. Moreover, this kind of identification does not seek to draw specific gender boundaries; rather it addresses a kind of identification that is available to both women and men.78

Nonetheless, some ecofeminists have argued that there is something special about women’s experience that makes women better placed than men to identify with nonhuman beings, ecological processes, and the larger whole. This argument takes two forms (although these are not always clearly differentiated). On the one hand, it is often claimed, or more usually implied, that this ease of identification with the rest of nature arises by virtue of what is unique about women’s bodies (e.g., ovulation, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and suckling the young). Here, the special connection between women and nature is usually presented as something that is grounded in women’s reproductive and associated nurturing capabilities. On the other hand, it is often claimed that this readiness to identify with the rest of nature arises by virtue of women’s oppression. That is, the separate social reality of women that has resulted from the division of labor in patriarchal societies (i.e., between the spheres of reproduction [women] and production [men]) is heralded as the basis of an alternative, nurturing, and more caring morality.79

I will refer to these two arguments as the “body-based argument” and the “oppression argument” respectively. In both cases, the closer connection between woman and nature (whether biologically based or culturally assigned) is embraced as a source of special insight and empowerment for women.

Depending on how they are formulated, these two arguments carry significant insights that can assist in the task of ecological and social reconstruction. However, these arguments also raise a number of problems if pressed too far. While it cannot be denied that male and female bodily experiences do differ in a number of important respects, it is problematic to suggest that the particular bodily experiences that are unique to women confer on women a superior (as distinct from merely special) insight into our relatedness with life.80 Such an argument effectively introduces a new hierarchical dualism that subtly condems men to an inferior status (of Otherness) on the ground that men’s bodily differences render them incapable of participating in the particular kind of body-based consciousness that is believed to confer on women a keener psychological awareness of ecological connectedness. Yet, as transpersonal ecologists and some ecofeminists show, there is no a priori reason why men and women cannot both participate in body based forms of identification (whether personal or cosmological).81 To the extent that bodily experiences may differ between men and women, there is no reason why either should be socially elevated as superior to the other. Moreover, the nurturing qualities usually associated with women can for the most part be attributed to the social division of labor and therefore can be made more culturally diffuse through shared parenting (the latter reform is, of course, strongly supported by feminists and ecofeminists). Finally, as Joan Griscom observes,

simply because women are able to bear children does not mean that doing so is essential to our nature. Contraception clarifies this distinction: the ability to give birth can now be suppressed, and there are powerful ecological pressures in favor of this. In this context, it is important that biology not be our destiny.82

The oppression argument—that women are in a better position to critically evaluate ecological practices and envision an alternative society by virtue of their oppression rather than their biology per se—provides a more defensible reason for paying special attention to the experiences of women. That women have been less implicated than men in major activities and centers of ecological destruction (e.g., the military, the boardroom, science, and bureaucracy) is itself an excellent reason to hear what women have to say on the subject of ecological reconstruction. Most women do occupy a vantage point of “critical otherness” from which they can offer a different way of looking at the problems of both patriarchy and ecological destruction. Of course, the same can be said for many other minority groups and classes such as indigenous tribespeople, ethnic minorities, and other oppressed groups—a point that is of crucial importance if we are to develop a general emancipatory theory. Here, ecofeminist theorists need to be wary of the problem of over-identifying with, and hence accepting uncritically, the perspective of women. Such an over-identification can sometimes inhibit the general emancipatory process by offering an analysis that can (i) deny the extent to which many women may be complicit in the domination of nature; (ii) overlook the various ways in which men have been oppressed by limiting “masculine stereotypes”; and (iii) be blind to other social dynamics, institutions, and prejudices that do not bear on the question of gender. Moreover, privileging—rather than simply rendering visible and critically incorporating—the special insights of women can sometimes lead to a lopsided and reductionist analysis of social and ecological problems.

For example, an uncritical identification with the female stereotype can sometimes lead to a simple reversal of the human characteristics that are considered to be valuable, that is, a replacement of the hypernormal, impersonal, and abstract “male” standard of human excellence with an excessively particular, personal, and emotional “female” standard. Indeed, many ecofeminists, drawing on theories of gender and self-development (such as object relations theory), have argued that the “feminine” sense of self is preferable to the “masculine” sense of self on the ground that it gives rise to a more personal, reciprocal, emotional, and contextualized “caring ethic” as opposed to an abstract, rights-based ideal of justice.83 While we certainly need to discredit the masculine stereotype we also need to be wary of certain aspects of the
feminine stereotype. Indeed, if the speculative theory of object relations tells us anything, it is that the prevailing stereotypical male and female senses of self are both deficient—that the former is excessively delineated whereas the latter is not delineated enough. This would seem to undermine the claim that a new environmental ethic ought to speak in the "different voice" of women (to adopt Carol Gilligan's phrase, although this is not her claim), suggesting instead that both the masculine and feminine stereotypes need to be transcended (at least in part and not necessarily to the same degree), not only by shared parenting but also by other kinds of social and cultural change.

A further tendency toward reductionism is illustrated by the argument maintained, or implied, by some ecofeminists that it is patriarchy that lies at the root of the domination of women and nature. This argument suggests that the principal focus of an emancipatory ecological praxis must be patriarchy rather than anthropocentrism (indeed, this charge has been levelled against deep ecology). However, it is one thing to note parallels in the logic or symbolic structure of different kinds of domination (surely this is enough to explain the strong resonance in the egalitarian orientations of the radical feminist and ecology movements) and another thing to argue that the kinds of domination that radical feminists and radical ecologists are addressing stem from one source. To maintain this causal explanation, it must be shown that patriarchy not only predated but also gave rise to anthropocentrism—in other words, that there is a necessary connection between the two phenomena. How, then, do we explain the existence of patriarchy in traditional societies that have lived in harmony with the natural world? How do we explain Engels' vision of "scientific socialism," according to which the possibility of egalitarian social/sexual relations is premised on the instrumental manipulation and domination of the nonhuman world? Clearly, patriarchy and the domination of nonhuman nature can each be the product of quite different conceptual and historical developments. It follows that the emancipation of women need not necessarily lead to the emancipation of the nonhuman world and vice versa.

The above criticisms are not intended to deny that patriarchy and anthropocentrism can be mutually reinforcing when they do occur together. In this respect, both women and the nonhuman world can indeed be seen to have a mutual "interest" in emancipation from the status of Otherness. Moreover, at the symbolic and conceptual levels, both women and nonhuman nature have been associated and downgraded in the God-Man-Woman-Nature hierarchy of being—a conceptual schema that has served to legitimate the greater social status and power held by men vis-à-vis women and nonhuman nature. However, as Fox has argued, a variety of human/nonhuman distinctions have served as the fundamental legitimating ideology not only for patriarchy but also for other kinds of human oppression. For example, the fundamental legitimating ideology of racism and imperialism has been that whites and Westerners are seen to possess—or possess to a greater extent than their counterparts (i.e., blacks, or non-Westerners)—certain qualities that are deemed to be of the essence of humanness (e.g., rationality, civilization, or being more favored by God). In other words, not only men but also whites and Westerners (both men and women) have sought to legitimate their superior social position by claiming that they are somehow "more fully human" than, and hence morally superior to, women, blacks, and non-Westerners. Of course, as Val Plumwood has pointed out, the success of this kind of legitimization in relation to patriarchy depends on a general acceptance of a concept of the human that is set apart from the rest of the animal world on a hierarchy of being. Replacing such a hierarchical mode of perceiving the world with an ecological sense of self that affirms others (both humans and nonhumans) in a state of reciprocal interdependence serves to undermine the conceptual apparatus that has legitimated not only patriarchy and other forms of human oppression but also anthropocentrism. In other words, patriarchy may be seen as not the root of the ecological crisis but rather a subset of a more general problem of philosophical dualism that has pervaded Western thought (e.g., mind/body, reason/emotion, human/nonhuman) from the time of the classical Greek philosophers.

Such a recognition has led many ecofeminists (including transpersonal ecologists and many ecofeminists) to argue that we need to transcend masculine and feminine stereotypes and cultivate a new kind of person that possesses "the human characteristics of gentleness and caring" (my emphasis). This does not mean that the new ecological person must be thoroughly androgynous or gender neutral (there is no reason why the differences between men and women should not be celebrated), only that a person's sex is not considered to have an important bearing on the human qualities that are needed to heal the rift between humans and the rest of nature. As Don E. Marietta has put it, "We are talking about people who cultivate the best qualities of human beings, regardless of the traditional assignment of those to one sex. These qualities of character and behaviour indicate, I believe, the values supported by feminism." Similarly, Val Plumwood has argued that what we now need is "an account of the human ideal for both sexes, which accepts the undivisibility of the domination of nature associated with masculinity. Such an ideal must flow from a critique of both masculinity and femininity and be linked to a "systematic transcendence of the wider set of dualisms" (e.g., mind/body, reason/emotion, public/private).

To recapitulate, then, ecofeminists have drawn attention to the conceptual parallels, symbolic resonances, and areas of practical overlap in both the critical and constructive tasks of the radical wings of the ecology movement and the women's movement. However, in those areas where ecofeminism diverges from a deep/transpersonal ecology perspective (i.e., in emphasizing
purely personally based forms of identification; in sometimes uncritically privileging the experience of women; and in sometimes overstating the links between patriarchy and the domination of nature) it is vulnerable to criticism. Of course, not all ecofeminists make these claims and, of those who have, not all have pursued them in the same way or to the same end. Indeed, given that there are many different kinds of feminism (e.g., liberal, Marxist, socialist, radical, existentialist, psychoanalytical, and postmodern), it is hardly surprising to find that there is more than one kind of ecofeminism.

However, when we turn to those particular expressions of ecofeminism that are not vulnerable to the above criticisms, we find an ecophilosophical orientation that is almost indistinguishable from that of transpersonal ecology. That is, we find a similar ecophilosophical orientation of inclusiveness, albeit from an “inside-out” rather than an “outside-in” route. The qualification “almost” remains important, however, when it comes to deciding on an ecophilosophical framework and label for a general emancipatory theory.

Such a framework must be able to critically incorporate the special experiences and perspectives of all oppressed social groups, not just women. Now an ecofeminist perspective is quite capable of doing this—indeed, Karen Warren has defended an inclusive and pluralistic version of ecofeminism that is concerned to end all forms of oppression (and which provides a general ecocentric emancipatory theory). Yet some ecofeminists might want to argue that ecofeminism should remain a specifically feminist project in the sense of providing a special voice to women in view of the pervasiveness of patriarchal culture and its links with the domination of nature. (In any event, this is what is suggested by the label “ecofeminist.”) This is, I believe, a valid case, although it would mean that ecofeminism would then become a major and essential tributary of a general ecocentric emancipatory framework rather than serve as the general emancipatory framework. Moreover, a case might be made that a general ecocentric emancipatory theory must be one that in both purpose and name does not privilege the concerns of any particular human emancipatory movement.

Whatever label is ultimately adopted, however, a general ecocentric emancipatory theory must accommodate all human emancipatory struggles within a broader, ecological framework. That is, it must be able to provide the context for establishing the outer ecological limits within which the different needs of human emancipatory movements can be addressed and harmonized in order to ensure that the interests of the nonhuman world are not continually sacrificed in the name of human emancipation. The emancipatory concerns of new social movements—including the women’s movement—may thus be seen as nesting within such an ecocentric framework. Transpersonal ecology provides one such general theoretical articulation of ecocentrism. As we have seen, autopoietic intrinsic value theory provides a complementary general theory of ecocentrism. Ecofeminism can provide, at

a minimum, an essential component of a general ecocentric theory by pointing to the links between the domination of women and the domination of nature, or, alternatively, it can be formulated in such a way as to provide a general theory of ecocentrism. However, all of these approaches provide only the ecophilosophical underpinnings of ecocentrism. It remains to explore how this inclusive ecophilosophical framework might be fleshed out in a political and economic direction.