ECOFEMINISM

PATRIARCHAL DUALISMS

Like the varieties of thought considered in chapter 2, ecofeminism is a radical ecophilosophy; but it merits separate treatment, for it is both that and more. Its ethics are subordinate to a theory of power, and the perceived lack of an adequate account of social structure and political power in radical ecophilosophies has attracted sustained ecofeminist criticism. Some ecofeminists, Ariel Salleh for example, also oppose the 'philosophication' of ecofeminism, on the ground that women do not need ethical abstraction as a basis for an authentic grounding within nature (Salleh 1984; see also Davion 1994: 18) — on the ground, indeed, that a preoccupation with abstraction directly partakes of dominance-imbued, masculine modes of thought. In this vein Irene Diamond and Lisa Kuppler proclaim that 'the strength of ecofeminism is in the streets', where 'close attention to the practices of ecofeminism recovers what much academic discourse loses' (1990: 160, 176).

There is another reason, too, for according ecofeminism separate consideration. It was earlier suggested that radical ecophilosophy may no longer be at the cutting edge of green thought. This observation certainly does not apply to ecofeminism, which, as a theory of power relations and political action first and foremost, remains particularly robust. Although a culture of embarrassment prevents most ecofeminists from acknowledging it, a survey of the current state of green intellectual and activist development can only lead to the conclusion that ecofeminism is now the predominant position within ecological thought.

The simplest definition of ecofeminism holds it to be an ecologically informed feminism, though some would find this breathtakingly inadequate. For instance, Ariel Salleh argues that the embedded materialism of ecofeminism is a "womanist" rather than a feminist politics. It theorises an intuitive historical choice of re/sisters around the world to put life before freedom (1997: ix-x). There are, of course, several varieties of feminism; in its stress upon an ecological dimension ecofeminism is, I think, rightly considered distinct from other forms of feminism. But I will come at this obliquely.

As we have seen, the main point over which ecofeminism has taken issue with deep ecology is the latter's identification of anthropocentrism as the factor responsible for the destruction of nature. Against this, ecofeminism argues for an explanation from androcentrism that the destruction of nature is consequent upon structures of exploitation embedded within human society. And the particular structure to which ecofeminist attention is directed is that based around gender.

There is nothing particularly ecofeminist about such an analysis. All feminisms identify patriarchy as the most significant of the constraints upon the fulfillment of human potential. Patriarchy is a gender privileging system of power relations that is subtly embedded within dominant social structures, at all social levels, across almost all cultures, and sustained throughout most of history. The explanation for its tenacity is to be found, not in overt discrimination (though such discrimination is often overt), but within conceptual frameworks that systematically deny access and justice to women. There are other axes of discrimination, too — age, class, religion, race — but the most enduring axis of discrimination is gender. Karen Warren defines the especially potent patriarchal paradigm thus:

a patriarchal conceptual framework is one which takes traditionally male-identified beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions as the only, or the standard, or superior ones; it gives higher status or prestige to what has been traditionally identified as 'male' than to what has been traditionally identified as 'female'. A patriarchal conceptual framework is characterized by value-hierarchical thinking (1987: 6).

Two things follow. The first is that the key mechanism of patriarchal domination is not overtly institutional; it is, rather, engrained within our most fundamental perceptions, and all the more difficult to combat by virtue of its non-tangibility.

The second is that the patriarchal conceptual framework is inherently dualistic, for the value hierarchies to which Warren makes reference are not complex; they consist of opposed pairs of values and interests, corresponding to the gender division itself, in which the 'male' interest/value is accorded superiority. More than just superior, though — the poles that are associated with 'male' are held to be transcendent rather than merely gender-specific. Thus, masculine values are regarded as 'species-defining', whilst the feminine is marginalised and trivialised. This has led to the categorisation of women and the values
associated with the feminine as ‘other’, and it has paved the way for the development of systems of power and oppression that have consistently devalued the role and place of women.

There are several axes of dualistic conceptualisation identified within feminist literature as corresponding with a masculine/feminine dualism: mind/body; spirit/corporeality; abstraction/embodiment; sky/earth; competition/co-operation; asceticism/promiscuity; rationality/intuition; culture/nature (a more comprehensive catalogue of the dualisms in western thought is provided by Plumwood 1993a: 43). It is the masculine side of each of these dualisms, feminists argue, that has been elevated and universalised; herein lies its potency as an instrument of domination. Dualism, Plumwood explains, is a ‘logic of hierarchy’, in which women are reduced to ‘inferior, impoverished or imperfect human beings, lacking or possessing in a reduced form the characteristics of courage, control, rationality and freedom which make humans what they are’ (Plumwood 1993b: 36). And this is made to seem the unavoidable order of things, a process, in Rosemary Ruether’s words, of ‘naturalized domination’ (1975: 189; see also 1992: 3; King 1989; Plumwood 1986: 122–24; K.J. Warren 1987: 3).

Patriarchal dualism has been central to ecofeminist analysis since Ruether’s pioneering work, New Woman, New Earth, was published in 1975 (though the coming of the term ‘ecofeminism’ is usually attributed to a French feminist, Françoise d’Eaubonne, in 1974). Although patriarchal dualism remains prominent within Ruether’s thought (1992: 3), its most comprehensive treatment is provided by Val Plumwood. Unlike much ecofeminist analysis, Plumwood’s work presents a theory of multi-faceted domination/subordination relationships stemming from the series of interlinked dualisms noted above. ‘I use examples from a number of forms of oppression, especially gender, race and colonisation’, she writes, ‘to show how this structure is, and discuss its logical formulation. By means of dualism, the colonised are appropriated, incorporated, into the selfishhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity’ (1993a: 41). Plumwood is therefore able to present patriarchal dualism as a central mechanism of social domination whilst addressing other axes of domination besides gender and human/nature: ‘the set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms which permeate western culture forms a fault-line which runs through its entire conceptual system’ (1993a: 42).

Plumwood also deals effectively with one of the conceptual difficulties that have plagued feminist thought: if dualism is so pervasive, if it is so robust that it has persisted through all history and most cultures, is it not inevitable that it will always prevail? Plumwood says not. She says that it is precisely because it has always been accepted as the natural order of things that it has attained its aura of invincibility (she instances Heidegger and Beauvoir as examples of influential near-contemporary thinkers who saw dualism as ‘an inevitable part of the human condition’; 1993a: 61). Recognition that dualism is a political artefact rather than the natural order of things goes a long way towards creating conditions for effective resistance. The problem, after all, is essentially one of perception; of escaping the tyranny of subordinated identity.

the logic of colonisation creates complementary and, in advanced cases, conflict subordinated identities in and through colonisation. The reclamation and affirmation of subordinated identity is one of the key problems for the colonised, especially in race, class, and ethnic colonisation. The affirmation of women and the feminine falls within this problematic (Plumwood 1993a: 61).

NATURE AND GENDER

Whilst there is nothing specifically ecofeminist about theorising dualism, such analysis does loom large within ecofeminism. This is because of the focus within ecofeminism on the dualisms that link the subordination of women to the subordination of non-human nature.

If there is one central contention within ecofeminism it is that the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women are intimately linked. In Ariel Salleh’s words, ‘the basic premise in ecofeminism is acknowledgement of the parallel in men’s thinking between their “right” to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other’ (Salleh 1989: 26). Ecofeminists maintain that in patriarchal cultures not only has nature been strongly identified with the feminine but the reverse has also been true. ‘In these cultures’, writes Janis Birckland, ‘women have historically been seen as closer to the earth or nature’ (1993: 18), and this identification has set in process a complex morality based on domination and exploitation’ (1993: 19) in which the two linked foci of exploitation are powerfully and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, these twin foci of exploitation are bolstered by other axes of dualist thought. Thus, the nature/feminine principle is associated with the primitive rather than the civilized, with the realm of necessity rather than freedom and high-mindedness, with carnality rather than discipline, with associative, ‘non-rigorous’ thought rather than rationality, and so on.

That this nature–feminine association has been a persistent core assumption within western culture, and that it has been used to legitimize the domination of both women and nature, seems incontestable. Events in the seventeenth century throw this observation into sharp relief. In licensing the total conquest of nature, in rendering nature inert and insensible in order to morally justify the dissecting table, Francis Bacon, particularly in Novum Organum (1620) and The New Atlantis (1626), used vivid sexual imagery to describe the force and violence with which nature’s secrets would be extracted from her (Merchant 1980: 164–76; 1992: 46–47; Sheldrake 1990: 29–32).
Bacon was aware of (perhaps even involved in) the witch trials prevalent in England and mainland Europe at the time; in fact, 'much of the imagery he used in delineating his new scientific objectives and methods derived from the courtroom, and, because it treats nature as a female to be tortured through mechanical inventions, strongly suggests the interrogations of the witch trials and the mechanical devices used to torture witches' (Merchant 1980: 168). 'Is it?', Patsy Hallen asks, 'an accident that modern science was born during the "burning times" when 8–11 million women were killed on charges of witchcraft? (1994: 19). Almost certainly not. Brian Easlea's investigation of the intellectual and political currents surrounding the 300 years of witch-hunting led him to the conclusion that there were two related factors that brought about the period of terror in which the witch persecutions took place. The first of these was economic self-interest. Women, particularly older women — witches — were the repositories of the natural medicinal lore that had been handed down in the oral tradition through the centuries. They were the main obstacle to the rapidly growing class of professional — and male — physicians and doctors. But, Easlea concludes, this does not of itself explain the zeal and ferocity with which the persecution of witches was pursued. Also important were 'non-economic factors such as gender identity and social attitudes' (1994: 7; see also Mies 1986: 83–87).

Women and nature, then, are deemed inferior categories of beings, existing as raw material for man's physical needs. But perhaps this can be turned around. Perhaps it can be argued that women and nature do exist in a special relationship, and that this relationship, far from being an axis of inferiority, actually renders women uniquely capable of ecological insight, and thus places upon them the prime responsibility for devising strategies for planetary healing.

This line of argument — since labelled 'biological essentialism' — characterised the writings of ecofeminists in the 1970s and early 1980s. Thus, Joan Griscom observed in 1981, 'nature feminists are now invoking women's closeness to nature in order to heighten our value. A powerful theme in their work is the idea that women are closer to nature than men' (1981: 8). This biological 'closeness' was said to stem from women's physiology; from the menstrual cycle, the acts of carrying and giving birth to young life, and from nurturing and nursing — all processes said to make for a privileged oneness with Mother Earth and innate attunement to the rhythms of other natural processes. Close involvement in the planetary rhythms acts to ward off the hubris to which the masculine gender is prone, providing constant reminders of mortality and biophysical limits, necessary correctives from which men are in large part shielded (for examples of this line of thought, see S. Griffin 1978; Salleh 1984).

Other arguments claiming a privileged empathy for women with the non-human world rested less on biology than on socio-historical factors. Ynestra King wrote at the time:

the liberation of women is to be found neither in severing all connections that root us in nature nor in believing ourselves to be more natural than men. Both of these positions are unwittingly complicit with nature/culture dualism. Women's oppression is not strictly historical nor strictly biological. It is both (1981: 14-15).

King voices a connection between the special historical experience of women and their ability to connect empathetically with the natural world. It is a perspective that urges celebration of the deviant reality of being female, a stance that has been described by King as 'critical otherness' (1981: 14). She was one of the first critics of the notion that women's biology makes them more 'natural' beings than men. 'Since all life is interconnected', the argument ran, 'one group of persons cannot be closer to nature' (Birkeland 1993: 22), though 'women have a critical edge from which to view the artificial chasm male culture has placed between itself and nature' (King 1981: 14). Noting the difference between this position and the biological essentialism of Susan Griffin and the early Salleh, Deborah Slicer (1994: 34) observes that this insights-from-historical-experience position is similar to what has been called in the wider feminist literature a 'feminist standpoint'.

With King's, Joan Griscom's was one of the first voices raised against essentialism:

I find it difficult to assert that men are 'further' from nature because they neither menstruate nor bear children. They also eat, breathe, exercise, sleep and die; and all of these, like menstruation, are experiences of bodily limits. Like any organism, they are involved in constant biological exchange with their environment and they have built-in biological clocks complete with cycles. They also play a role in childbearing. In reproduction, men's genes are as important as women's (1981: 8).

Through the 1980s the Griscom–King position attained wide acceptance within ecofeminism. Thus, Ariel Salleh, who had written in 1984 that 'women's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature' (1984: 340), had, by the 1990s, come to see the notion that 'women are superior to men because of innate qualities as `naive' (1993b: 98). Whilst leaving some space for biology (1993b: 99; 1994: 116), Salleh now sees ecofeminism's 'profoundly democratic project' as a politics that 'enlists men to join women in reaffirming their place as part of nature, and in formulating new social institutions in line with that position' (1993b: 100; see also 1997: 13) — certainly not the project of a biological essentialist.

If not essentialism, what of the notion of a 'feminist standpoint' — a point of cultural vantage based upon women's long history of being
treated as 'other.' The argument from culture seems now to be, and to have been since the late 1980s, the position enjoying broadest support within ecofeminism. By the end of the 1980s only a small number of ecofeminist writers — Andree Collard (Collard, with Conrucci 1988), Mary Daly (1987), Sharon Dohiago (1989) and Deena Metzger (1989) come most readily to mind — still held to a strict biological essentialism. Plumwood puts the argument from culture thus:

to the extent that women’s lives have been lived in ways which are less directly oppositional to nature than those of men, and have involved different and less oppositional practices, qualities of care and kinds of self-hood, an ecological feminist position could and should privilege some of the experiences and practices of women over those of men as a source of change without being committed to any form of naturalism (1993a: 34; see also Salleh 1994: 116).

In such a view the experience of women’s reproductive role is still important, because this experience includes aspects other than the strictly biological. The different historical experiences from which men and women derive their social roles, their access to power, and their personal identities ‘are real, and although not necessarily inherent in biology are not just conventional either’. Women have historically been assigned roles that have permitted the development of insights and empaties denied to men — Plumwood uses the phrase “custodians” of a different culture (1993a: 201) — but which are ‘in principle’ accessible to them.

This may be the dominant position within ecofeminism, but it is not uncontested. Christine Cuomo has questioned the extent to which ecofeminism should make any claims to special empathy with nature on the basis of a gender-specific cultural heritage. Both female and male identities are established in part ‘through elevation over the natural world.’ Thus:

ecofeminists should not romanticize the connections between women and nature. Many human females have been conceived, and have conceived of themselves, as dominators within the logic of domination — as above nature, and/or as above other members of the human species. Women, especially members of industrial and technological societies, have contributed to the oppression of the nonhuman world, and must admit to this complicity so that they can create alternatives (1992: 356).

A similar view is expressed by Victoria Davion, who argues that some men feel more connected to nature than some women; many women, indeed, feel no connection at all (1994: 25–26).

Ecofeminism, it is clear, is evolving at such a rate that it is difficult to state with confidence what the defining characteristics of the movement are at any point of time, and this is particularly the case with the vexed question of the women–nature relationship. Among the major casualties of this evolution have been the Mother Earth and Mother Nature metaphors. As Joni Seager observes, ‘the conceptualization of the earth as a mother has a long and honorable history: Earth as Mother, as a sacred and honored female life force, is a powerful icon in non-Christian, nonEuroAmerican, mostly agricultural cosmography’ (1993: 219). But Primal Mother cosmography cannot be imported into western culture while retaining its original meanings intact. In fact, the Mother Earth/Mother Nature icons are now seen as components of the linguistic structure of patriarchal domination. They perpetuate western images of the mother as eternally generous, unceasingly fecund and bountiful to the point of inexhaustibility, whilst meriting no economic value. They are complicit, then, in the women–nature nexus of exploitation.

It is difficult to contest such an observation. It is remarkable how frequently the ‘Mother Nature’ image occurs in political debate over controversial environmental issues, and how frequently it is invoked by those who defend violence against nature on the ground of Mother Nature’s resilience, great absorbing capacities, and healing power. Against this, Seager argues:

The earth is not our mother. There is no warm, nurturing, anthropomorphized earth that will take care of us if only we treat her nicely. The complex, emotion-laden, conflict-laden, quasi-sexualized, quasi-dependent mother relationship ... is not an effective metaphor for environmental action (1993: 219; see also T. Berman 1994; Merchant 1996).

Other charges against the use of the Mother Earth image are that it allows those most complicit in environmental destruction to escape responsibility, because ‘if the earth is really our mother, then we are children, and cannot be held fully accountable for our actions’ (Seager 1993: 219); and that ‘anthropomorphizing the earth ... is disrespectful ... for it seeks to understand another not on her or his own terms but as a projection of ourselves’ (Gaard 1993: 305).

Because the ‘Earth as Great Mother’ image is entwined with native peoples’ cosmologies, particularly the cosmologies of native North Americans, and because these cosmologies are crucial to primal earth/goddess ecofeminism, the fall from favour of the Mother Earth metaphor exacerbated a rift that emerged within ecofeminism in the early 1990s. Why a rift? To answer this question we must note the historically prominent strand of ecofeminist thought that is characterized by a search, through close identification with nature, for a primal earth-based ecofeminist spirituality. It is a position that does still hold to the belief in women’s superior natural insightfulness.

There has been much ecofeminist interest in primal peoples’ religions, particularly in the earth-based religions of the native peoples of North America, Australia and pre-Christian Europe, and in the shamanic practices characteristic of many of those religions (Starhawk
Carolyn Merchant depicts this strand of ecofeminism as:

celebrating the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system. A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists (1992: 191).

The revival of earth-based spirituality will be revisited in chapter 4, where it seems more appropriately placed given that not all its practitioners are ecofeminists; indeed, one of its most prominent partisans, Dolores La Chapelle, explicitly identifies with deep ecology and against ecofeminism (La Chapelle 1989). What is germane here is the basis on which primal earth ecofeminists hold their ecofeminism. Merchant observes of them that:

human nature is grounded in human biology. Humans are biologically sexed and socially gendered . . . . The perceived connection between women and biological reproduction turned upside down becomes the source of women’s empowerment and ecological activism. Women’s biology and Nature are celebrated as sources of female power. This form of ecofeminism has largely focused on the sphere of consciousness in relation to nature — spirituality, goddess worship, witchcraft — and the celebration of women’s bodies (1992: 191–92).

In this reading primal earth ecofeminism partakes of biological essentialism; indeed, earth-based spirituality is the only major strand of ecofeminism to remain supportive of biological essentialism. Small wonder that just as essentialism fell from favour, so did Earth goddess spirituality become, for a time, somewhat marginalised within ecofeminism. Other factors also contributed to this. Cuomo (1998: 6), Garb (1990), Plumwood (1993a: 126–28), and Seager (1993: 250–51) detail criticisms of ‘goddess pantheism’, whilst Birkeland (1993: 47–49) finds no fewer than nine grounds for rejecting mystical spiritualities. One particularly telling criticism centres around the perceived act of cultural appropriation involved in the ‘Europeanisation’ of native spiritual traditions. Karen Warren describes this process as ‘an expression of ethnocentric colonialism, coopting indigenous cultural practices as part of an otherwise unchanged dominant Western worldview’ (1993: 124), whilst Carol Adams writes:

what Eurocentric outsiders identify as the ‘spiritual’ dimensions of a culture may actually be a thoroughly eviscerated spirituality that a dualistic world view cannot even perceive. And regrettable, some aspects of Euro American ecofeminism have ‘borrowed’ from these cultures those parts that resonate with a non-instrumental view of human nature and have depoliticized the context for these views. In many instances cultures that are struggling for physical survival against genocide are romanticized, their spirituality misappropriated and misunderstood (1993: 3).

Of course, it is important to distinguish between primal-earth ecofeminism and an ecofeminism which promotes a broadly based concern for spiritual matters whilst nevertheless eschewing immersion in primal earth cosmology. Thus, Greta Gaard, who rejects the ‘cultural imperialism’ involved in ‘plundering’ the spiritual traditions of native cultures, nevertheless sees ecofeminism as:

a way of describing a political theory and practice for what we know intuitively to be true. Knowledge and awareness of our interconnectedness provide the impetus for ecofeminist political acts as well as ecofeminist spirituality . . . . Ecofeminist spirituality is ecofeminist politics is ecofeminism. Without stealing pieces from other cultures and other traditions, ecofeminists can arrive at this answer on their own (1995: 309).

Such a broadly conceived concern for spirituality has always been prominent within ecofeminism.

FEMINISM AND ECOFEMINISM

I have indicated that ecofeminism warrants a distinct status within feminism on the ground of its unique focus on the women–nature nexus of subordination. But this observation requires justification. The use of the prefix ‘eco’ in front of ‘feminism’ has been resisted by some feminists. Anne Cameron has written:

the term ‘ecofeminism’ is an insult to the women who put themselves on the line, risked public disapproval, risked even violence and jail . . . . Feminism has always been actively involved in the peace movement, in the antimilitaristic movement, and in the environmental protection movement. Feminism is what helped teach us all that the link between political and industrial included the military and was a danger to all life on this planet. To separate ecology from feminism is to try to separate the heart from the head. I am not an ecofeminist. I am a feminist (1989: 64).

The difficulty with Cameron’s position is this. Think back to the early part of the chapter and consider again the dualisms listed there, particularly the ‘feminine’ half of those opposed attributes. Excluding ‘culture/nature’, there is no reason why the feminine attributes should not, in their practical applications, be thoroughly anti-ecological. In fact, as a German student of mine once pointed out, when these dualisms are applied to National Socialism, we find that a majority of the values fetishised by the Nazis are on the feminine side of the dualisms — and from that basis was launched the horror of the Holocaust and the most all-consuming military conflagration the world has yet seen.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the twentieth century’s most influential feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, having alerted us to the existence of these dualisms in the first place, wished to overcome them, not by championing the distinctively female, but by invading the male sphere.
adoption of those values for her own, and softening them from within. She sought, in particular, to rid feminism of its ecological concerns:

an enhanced status for traditional feminine values, such as woman and her rapport with nature, woman and her maternal instinct, woman and her physical being ... this renewed attempt to put women down to their traditional role, together with a small effort to meet some of the demands made by women — that’s the formula used to try and keep women quiet. Even women who call themselves feminists don’t always see through it. Once again, women are being defined in terms of the other”, once again they are being made into the “second sex”... Equating ecology with feminism is something that irritates me. They are not automatically one and the same thing at all (Beauvoir in Schwarzer 1984: 103).

Whereas her analysis of the historical association of women and nature as one of mutual subordination largely parallels ecofeminist analysis, Beauvoir’s project is not the liberation of both women and nature, but the liberation of women via a radical distancing from nature, that “vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned” (1982: 176). Liberation for women lies in rejecting nature for full, productive participation in the realms of culture that have hitherto been denied them. With modern technological achievement, women no longer need to be chained to the tyranny of their bodies. Now they can become as men, masters and possessors of nature, able to transcend nature’s enslaving chains through creative immersion within the golden fields of culture.

In her depiction of nature as the realm of necessity and un-freedom — as the dark nemesis of that great liberatory agent, culture, with which nature struggles in zero-sum conflict — Beauvoir herself makes the case for separating ecofeminism out from the other feminisms. Her position on “tyrannous nature” was widely adopted. Shulamith Firestone, for example, called for full liberation from “biological tyranny”, for “humanity can no longer afford to remain in the transitional stage between simple animal existence and full control of nature”. Furthermore, “we are much closer to a major evolutionary jump, indeed to direction of our own evolution, than we are to a return to the animal kingdom from which we came” (1970: 193).

So widespread was this position that it came to characterise what Plumwood has called “the first, masculinating wave of feminism”, “in the equal admittance strategy, women enter science, but science itself and its orientation to the domination of nature remain unchanged” (1988: 19). Plumwood notes that “the very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting”, an idea that conveys a view of women as “passive, reproductive animals ... immersed in the body and in unreflecting experiencing of life” (1993b: 38; see also King 1990).

Thus, it is not the case that, as Cameron would have it, all feminists share in a common project for the liberation of nature.

It is on this account that some ecofeminists have spelt out the distinctiveness of ecofeminism. Karen Warren identifies “four minimal condition claims of ecofeminism” (1987: 7). These place stress on the connections between the oppression of women and nature; an understanding that these linked forms of oppression are sanctioned by a ‘patriarchal conceptual framework’; a critique of patriarchal conceptual frameworks that is grounded in familiar ecological principles” (this grounding being the basis for the uniquely eco-feminist position that an adequate feminist theory and practice embrace an ecological perspective; 1987: 7–8); and the insight that an ecological politics must similarly “embrace a feminist perspective”. The stakes are high, Warren says, for what is in the balance is “the theoretical adequacy of feminism itself” (1987: 9).

She then provides an ecofeminist critique of the most prominent feminisms — liberal feminism, traditional Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism — each of which is tested against her four “minimal claims of ecofeminism” and found wanting in greater or lesser degree. Liberal feminism, which “endorses a highly individualistic conception of human nature” (1987: 8) insuffi ciently challenges the patriarchal conceptual framework, whilst:

the extreme individualism of a liberal feminist ecological perspective conflicts with the ecofeminist emphasis on the independent value of the integrity, diversity, and stability of ecosystems, and on the ecological themes of interconnectedness, unity in diversity, and equal value to all parts of the human-nature system. It also conflict with the “ecological ethics” per se. Ecological ethics are holistic, not individualistic; they take the value and well being of a species, community, or ecosystem, and not merely of particular individuals, as basic (1987: 10).

Traditional Marxist feminism fails to adequately conceptualise the connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature (1987: 11–13). Radical feminism has the virtue that it does locate the oppression of women unambiguously within patriarchy, which defines women as beings whose primary functions are either to bear and raise children ... or to satisfy male sexual desires” (1987: 14). But it incorporates biological essentialism, and Warren finds it inadequate for reasons similar to those already rehearsed. Finally, socialist feminism does recognise ‘the interconnections among various systems of oppression’, but it still fails to ‘explicitly address the systematic oppression of nature’ (1987: 17). Warren concludes by arguing for a ‘transformatory feminism’ which will supersede earlier feminisms (including the earlier ecofeminism of biological essentialism) and is to be equated with ecofeminism (1987: 17–20).

Plumwood also examines the relationship of ecofeminism to
feminism. Using the familiar wave metaphor to explain recent feminist history, Plumwood sees 'critical ecological feminism' as 'a third wave of stage of ecofeminism moving beyond the conventional divisions in feminist theory... It is prefigured in and builds on work not only in ecofeminism but in radical feminism, cultural feminism and social feminism'; even so, 'this critical ecological feminism conflicts with various other feminisms, by making an account of the connection to nature central in its understanding of feminism' (1993a: 39).

Ecofeminism's claim to constitute a feminism in its own right seems beyond dispute. We must wait to see whether it also has the capacity to supersede earlier feminist formulations in accordance with the visions of Warren and Plumwood.

AN ETHIC OF CARE

There are other uniquely ecofeminist contributions to environmental thought. Given the actionist orientation of ecofeminist thought, it comes as no surprise to find that much of this thought is developed within an issue framework. Ecofeminists have focused particularly upon the politics of women's bodies and on new reproductive technologies (Diamond and Kuppler 1990; Razak 1990), on the psycho-social aspects of birth and mothering, on issues of peace and disarmament (Birkeland 1993; K.J. Warren 1994), on questions of population and female infanticide (Cuomo 1994), on the economic and social conditions of women in developing countries (Shiva 1989), on women's work generally (Merchant 1996; Salleh 1990, 1994, 1997), and on the nature of western science/technology.

We will consider just two aspects of ecofeminist thought: one that encapsulates the distinctiveness of ecofeminist politics, and one that does likewise for ecofeminist ethics.

We have seen that ecofeminism views the structures of patriarchal power as not primarily institutional but lodged within time-hardened mindsets — mindsets so entrenched, that their components have been given the status of 'unchangeable nature'. It follows that the focus of effective action for social change has to include spheres of human interaction not conventionally thought to have political significance. All human interactions are characterised by relations of dominance, and all levels of human relationship must therefore be the focus of any realistic strategy for political change. The person, the aphorism runs, is the political. Hence the stress that is placed, within ecofeminist thought, on the political importance of human relations at the micro-level.

Of course, this focus is also present in other feminisms, though a stress upon micro-level politics, upon psycho-sexual factors, and upon the political importance of emotional needs and motivations is large-ly absent from non-feminist theory. Within ecofeminism these factors are used both at the level of the ordinary individual, to explain pathological behaviour within human relationships and between individuals and their sustaining environment, and at the level of national and global political power to explain the irresponsible, irrationally ecocidal activities routinely indulged in by proud men of power. Charlene Sprectznak writes: 'identifying the dynamics... largely fear and resentment... behind the dominance of male over female is the key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchieal, militaristic, mechanistic, industrial forms' (1988: 1). Other pathological doubts and urges stemming from oppressive power relationships have been identified as 'sexual identity, the fear of death, the link between personal worth and power, the repressed need to belong, and other expressions of personal insecurity' (Birkeland 1993: 19). Pathologies will continue to govern human relationships, at all levels, and continue to manifest in 'ecocidal' behaviour, says Birkeland, until we surmount 'the presumed necessity' of relationships based upon power (1993: 19). Nothing less ambitious is the political project of ecofeminism.

And so to the question of an ecofeminist ethic. Rather than the rights-based ethics of traditional western ethical discourse, Karen Warren posits a relational ethics based upon contexts within which interactions occur, and this relational ethics is characterised by compassion and humility in treating with what is 'other than I':

an ecofeminist perspective about women and nature involves this shift in attitude from 'arrogant perception' to 'loving perception' of the nonhuman world... Any environmental movement or ethic based on arrogant perception builds a moral hierarchy of beings. In contrast, 'loving perception' presupposes and maintains difference — a distinction between the self and other, between human and at least some nonhumans — in such a way that perception of the other as other is an expression of love for one who, which is recognized at the outset as independent, dissimilar, different (1990: 137).

This unselfconscious reference to a loving relationship with what is 'other than I' occurs frequently within ecofeminist writing. Chaia Heller, for example, writes that 'authentic love is a celebration of the distinctiveness of the other', insisting that 'knowledge of other people and of nature must be gleaned from actual labour or "caring for" the beloved. It cannot be "acquired" by meditating in isolation' (1993: 233). An ethic of care cannot, in other words, be derived from a process of intellectual abstraction. This 'loving perception' is the base in which Warren grounds an ecofeminist ethic of care, described thus: 'ecofeminism makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust, and appropriate reciprocity', wherein 'one is doing something in
relationship with an "other", an "other" whom one can come to care about and treat respectfully" (1990: 143).

There is also a psychological basis for relational ethics. Drawing on the object-relations school of feminist psychology (for example, Chodorow 1978), this position maintains that the liberal view of the ego as radically apart is a quintessentially male view that stems from the male child's anger at his first dismaying realisation that he is different to his mother, a sense of difference experienced as betrayal, and the source of deep-seated, gender focused resentment. The growing male comes to define himself as 'not female' and seeks, in the venting of his anger, to dominate the female — which includes nature. And, because the undifferentiated, pre-separation reality for boys was female, it is nature that subsequently becomes the undifferentiated natural backdrop against which individuals must struggle for identity. Girls maintain their sense of identity with their mothers for a much longer time than do boys, and thus their sense of self is bound up with relationship (Zimmerman 1987: 31). This conduces to a relational sense of self and, hence, a caring, relational ethics (on this, see Gilligan 1982; Zimmerman 1987: 31-32), whilst the male preoccupation with 'rights' can be related to the male need to erect barricades around his separateness across which other individuals may not intrude (Zimmerman 1987: 32).

Though object-relations theory is strongly congruent with relational ethics, it is differentially employed within ecofeminist ethics, and is less frequently invoked now than was the case in the 1980s. Warren, for example, seems to draw upon it only minimally.

Warren does draw fruitfully upon an earlier essay by Jim Cheney (1987), in which Cheney promoted the virtues of an ecofeminist ethic of care over rights-based ecophilosophies. He describes a 'moral community' based upon relations of care as:

a gift community in which selves are not atomistic entities protected by bundles of rights derived from, or tied to, bundles of properties or interests internal to the individuals. It is a community in which individuals are what they are in virtue of the trust, love, care, and friendships that bind the community together, not as an organism but as a community of individuals (1987: 129).

Cheney's criticism of rights-based ecophilosophy concentrates on deep ecology, a poorly chosen target because, of all the radical ecophilosophies based upon 'atomistic entities protected by bundles of rights' that he could have attacked, in choosing deep ecology he picked the one ecophilosophy which is conspicuously not rights-based. That Cheney's case against deep ecology is flawed is, however, not to say the same about his case for the relational ethic of care. It has attracted criticism, however, and it is to this and other objections to ecofeminism, or aspects thereof, that we now turn.

SOME PROBLEMS, INCLUDING THE TENACITY OF ESSENTIALISM

In a wide ranging paper Janis Birkeland identifies several 'misconceptions about ecofeminism', that 'it is dualistic, partial, anti-rational, and essentialist' (1993; 21). None of these assessments, she argues, withstand analysis.

The charge of 'dualism' stems from a perception that the privileging of a female standpoint maintains masculine/feminine dualism whilst merely reversing the ascription of superior value. Birkeland is probably right to label this a misconception. She reacts too strongly, however, when she insists that the charge is beneath contempt. For the claim that 'the concept of gender itself helps maintain the dualistic hierarchy' has been made from within ecofeminism (by Christine Cuomo 1992: 361). And ecofeminism is, of course, gender-based theory.

The notion of ecofeminism as 'partial' or 'incomplete' is also difficult to dispatch. Ecofeminism can be held to be 'partial' or 'incomplete' if it does not adequately theorise environmental degradation. It is in something of a bind stick here. Its most prominent proponents have been at pains to eschew reductionist explanation. Rightly so. But this makes for a degree of ambiguity over the causal status to be accorded 'patriarchy' in ecofeminist analysis. If it is not the base social pathology, with all other axes of domination secondary manifestations of it, upon what basis can it be claimed to be the most persistently significant axis of domination? What is its relationship to other forms of exploitation, if these are not causally linked to it, but run alongside patriarchal oppression through time? Despite the best efforts of ecofeminism's key theorists to move away from a patriarchal reductionism, these uncertainties continue to exert a pull back towards it.

The most important context in which this becomes a problem is the linked ascription of woman/nature exploitation to patriarchy. It can be argued that the exploitation of nature, at least, is not reducible to patriarchal social relations — more specifically, not reducible to the patriarchal identification of female and nature. This position has been well put by Robyn Eckersley:

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 (1992: 68; a similar point is made by W. Fox 1989).
Just as suspicions of reductionism have not been entirely dispelled, so, too, has the charge of essentialism not been answered to everyone's satisfaction. For Salleh the charge of essentialism is mere 'insult' (1997: xi). Birkeland is similarly emphatic that essentialism has no place within ecofeminism: the notion 'that women possess an essential nature — a biological connection or a spiritual affinity with nature that men do not ... would be inconsistent with the logic of ecofeminism'. Birkeland subscribes to the 'cultural experience' position: 'the assertion of “difference” is based on the historical socialization and oppression of women, not biology' (1993: 22). But it can be argued that this merely transfers a biologically based essentialism to an essentialist that is culturally grounded. Each position can be said to constitute 'special pleading' based upon gender. Each position involves a claim to 'epistemic privilege, of superior ecological insight and awareness' (Judy Evans 1993: 181; see also Wittbecker 1986: 181). Cuomo also rejects the validity of a 'special claim' even when it is based in culture rather than in biology. In her view — an ecofeminist view, as the conclusion of her paper makes clear — the 'veneration' of 'feminine values' 'promotes, rather than dismantles, a logic of domination' (1992: 352).

Thus, the situation remains unsettled. The biological essentialism of early ecofeminism has been rejected in favour of the privileging of a 'female standpoint' based upon a shared history of cultural oppression; this may, itself, merely transfer essentialism from one ground to another. But the question can be asked: if there is no historical or cultural basis upon which a special female empathy with the natural world can be claimed, what is left of ecofeminism? This chain of thought is followed by Judy Evans, and at the end of it she returns to liberal or first-wave feminism, arguing:

while there are many causes for which women may, and some of us will think, should work, by only one — a demand for equal treatment — is our cause as women advanced. And thus it makes sense, I suggest, to speak ... not of ecofeminists, but of ecologists who are feminists too. It follows ... that women have no especial, innate tendency towards, or interest in, ecological concerns; and that while ecology will be one of the causes for which we may work, if we do so as feminists it must be on a basis of equality with men, or rather, while striving for that (1993: 187).

For Evans, as with most liberal feminists, the stumbling block is nature. She concludes with a warning against 'celebrating the natural', for 'that could entrench more or less every aspect of the female condition many of us have sought to renounce. Having fought to emerge from “nature”, we must not go back' (1993: 187). Nervousness on this score is likely to preclude realisation of Warren's and Plumwood's desire for ecofeminism to attain a hegemonic position within feminism — to become feminism.

Within the environment movement others may reach a position similar to Evans's but for different reasons. If women have no special insights into nature, and if, as ecofeminists sometimes observe (for example, M. Daly 1987: 21), men need not expect women to let them off lightly by resolving the ecological crisis those same men have created, activists of either sex for whom the prime goal is the resolution of that ecological crisis may conclude that ecofeminism offers them little. Of course, this is not a problem if one's ecofeminism is essentialist (a similar point is made by Biehl 1993: 63). An essentialist comeback thus seems distinctly possible, and some ecofeminists have begun to argue for a more flexible line on the matter. For Noel Norgert there are strengths and weaknesses in an essentialist position, and she sets herself the task of finding 'presumably when and where both essentialism and anti-essentialism are useful, and where and to whom they may prove disabling' (1997: 8). Essentialism, for example, can sharpen the sense of oppositionality needed for effective activism (1997: 17). Cuomo, too, insists that 'strategic essentialisms ... can effectively mobilize women' (1998: 124), and she pleads for ecofeminists to again 'take seriously work that has been rejected as essentialist' (1998: 125).

The marginalisation of primal spirituality within ecofeminism has also been resisted. Karen Warren, noted earlier as someone who has detailed ecofeminist criticisms of earth-based spirituality, nevertheless argues for a place at the table for ecofeminist spiritualities, because such spiritualities can be 'life-affirming' and 'personally empowering' (1993: 130). Carol Adams, whose 1995 book, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, was important in rehabilitating earth-spirituality within ecofeminism, sees ecofeminism's celebration of diversity as providing in-principle support for spiritualist groundings:

we reject an either-or approach; we do not believe that we must decide between working to help human beings or working to stop environmental abuses, between politics and spirituality, between humans and the rest of nature. We recognize that addressing issues related to the sacred further ecofeminist goals. We do not denaturalize the sacred or despiritualize matter. The idea of diversity amidst relationship does not erase differences among us; nor does it deny our commonalities (1993: 4).

And Ruether not only defends the retention of a spiritualist perspective within ecofeminism, but even finds a place for a capital G God:

God, in ecofeminist spirituality, is the imminent source of life that sustains the whole planetary community. God is neither male nor anthropomorphic. God is the font from which the variety of plants and animals well up in each new generation, the matrix that sustains their life giving interdependency with one another (1993: 21).

The problem with the Birkeland position, then, is that it seems to assume a single entity when there is potent scope for considerable disagreement within ecofeminism. Responding to Janet Biehl's claim
(1991) that ecofeminist politics evince massive internal contradiction, Salleh observes that ‘because ecofeminist politics grows out of a plurality of social contexts, it will have many contradictions’ (1993b: 94; see also 1991: 30; Thrupp 1989). There are already ecofeminists seeking an alternative signifier to ‘ecofeminism’ or who ally a qualifying prefix to their ecofeminism. Thus, Carolyn Merchant (1990) and Mary Mellor (1992a; 1992b) describe themselves as ‘socialist ecofeminists’. ‘While radical eco-feminist philosophy embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and web-like human relationships, socialist eco-feminism would seek to give both production and reproduction a central place in materialist analysis’, writes Mellor (1992b: 44). It is, in fact, the socialist tradition within environmental thought that has most trenchingly critiqued ecofeminism. That rich possibilities for a fusion between the two have not hitherto been realised is lamented by Mellor (1992b: 45), whilst Merchant sets out the terms such a linkage might take:

socialist feminism incorporates many of the insights of radical feminism, but views both nature and human nature as historically and socially constructed. Human nature is seen as the product of historically changing interactions between humans and nature, men and women, classes and races. Any meaningful analysis must be grounded in an understanding of power not only in the personal but also in the political sphere (1990: 103).

Other ecosocialists, looking askance at the ‘intuition, ethic of caring, and web-like human-nature relationships’ within ecofeminism, see less prospect for fusion, finding ecofeminism to be incurably neo-romantic. Faber and O’Connor (1989a) took this position in Capitalism, Nature, Socialism and sparked considerable debate. Thrupp (1989), Salleh (1991), Martin O’Connor (1991) and Mellor (1992b) contested the issue, but Faber and O’Connor gave only marginal ground:

we would argue that radical ecofeminism is ‘neo-romantic’ ... ‘Romantic’ is associated with ‘intuition’. It has often been ‘anti-science and technology’ and it inverts Enlightenment by privileging body (human biology) over mind. Romanticism also is associated with organic theories emphasizing emotional ties to the community (‘caring’). In short, we would argue that radical ecofeminism is infused with romantic values (1989b: 177–78; see also 1991; Biehl 1991).

Faber and O’Connor include the care ethic in their criticism and ecosocialists are not the only movement theorists to be sceptical of ecofeminism’s care ethic. Cuomo finds in it precisely that self-sacrifice and self-effacement that feminism has struggled against for years:

female caring and compassion for oppressors are cornerstones of patriarchal systems. Women have forgiven oppressors, stayed with abusive husbands and partners, and sacrificed their own desires, because of their great ability to care for others ... the care ethic actually causes moral damage in women and, therefore, caring is not always a healthy and ethical choice for a moral agent (1992: 355; see also Card 1990).

Rather than a non-specific attitude of care, Cuomo wants to know whether a potential object of care merits that care: ‘to talk of caring and compassion in the abstract, without naming the object of the caring and the context in which the caring occurs, is ethically uninformativ’ (1992: 354.), because ‘the meanings and ethical relevance of acts of caring and compassion are determined by their contexts and their objects’ (1992: 355). Cuomo’s criticism does not rescue the care ethic; it entirely demolishes it. Once care is rendered situation dependent, it is no longer an ethic, no longer a principle for shaping action, because it has been rendered potentially subservient to other considerations. And as the greatest monsters our species has produced have usually seen some form or item of life as a meritorious object of care — their cat, their mother, the he-en-volk — Cuomo’s notion of contextualised care is also ‘ethically uninformativ’. Yet, there is force to her argument, for how is an undifferentiated ethic of care ever to serve as a guide for real-world action if it does not provide a mechanism for judging between rival claims upon our care? All political action, after all, proceeds from the assumption that some ends and interests are more careworthy than others. If that assumption is not made the only alternative is terminal political paralysis.

Ecofeminism’s activist credentials have also been questioned in another context. A more general query is raised again from an empathetic insider’s perspective — by Joni Seager (1993: 247–52), who identifies an ‘apolitical undercurrent’ within ecofeminism, a ‘think-your-way-out-of-oppression’ politics that does not necessarily suggest a political direction for a feminist rethinking of the ecology question:

despite the many ecofeminists who do not fall into this trap, there is a strong apolitical,acentural, and ahistorical undercurrent to ecofeminism that is especially limiting. Environmental destruction takes place in a political and politicized context. Environmentalism must remain a political movement. Such a movement, while it should be concerned with the psycho well being of its supporters should not exist primarily to minister to their personal needs (1993: 251–52).

A charge that ecofeminism uses against deep ecology — that it is ahistorical and apolitical — is thus used by Seager against ecofeminism. But this is surely a less formidable problem for ecofeminism. Seager mistakes an ultimately minor, peculiarly hair-chested North American variant of deep ecology for deep ecology. She similarly mistakes a particular, historically dated North American ecofeminist essentialism for ecofeminism — and this notwithstanding her acknowledgement that ‘the ecofeminist umbrella is a big one, and there are many important shades of difference

Finally, from a non-partisan perspective within environmentalism, ecofeminists may be seen to hold their feminism as primary, with their ecologism — the ‘eco’ bit — very much subordinate: a mere label of orientation rather than an identification. ‘Ecological feminists take the commitments of feminism … as far less problematic than the histories of environmental thought and science created by men’, writes Cuomo, approvingly, ‘even when feminism neglects to take seriously the interests of human and nonhuman beings’ (1998: 53). Put bluntly, then, ecofeminists may be seen to identify with a sisterhood of feminism, but not with a family of environmentalism. Evidence adduced in support of this view would especially instance the hostility evinced in ecofeminism to deep ecology. As we have seen, for a time in the early 1990s ecofeminist papers seemed almost to be written to a formula, with the inclusion of an almost ritualised denunciation of wrongheaded deep ecology being a required component of that formula. More specifically targeted attacks upon deep ecology also abound; some of these (for example, Doublago 1989; Slicer 1995) are passionately voiced. We have also seen that several ecofeminists have been concerned to explicate the specialness of ecofeminism, and to critique the perceived inadequacies of earlier feminisms in the process. But in few cases has this critique achieved the prominence or passion of the critique of deep ecology. Thus, Slicer — having noted that ‘ecofeminism, we should remember, is a critique not only of androcentric environmental philosophy but of some feminist theory as well’ (1994: 35) — proceeds to ignore her own stricture as she devotes the rest of her paper to a critique of deep ecology and other ‘errant’ environmentalisms. By contrast, I know of no purpose-built ecofeminist repudiations of liberal feminism, and few have shown the willingness of Ynestra King (1981; 1989), Val Plumwood (1993a) and Ariel Salleh (1997) to decisively distance their ecofeminism from ‘masculinising’ first-wave feminism. For Salleh, whilst environmentalist paradigms are ‘pre-feminist’, feminist paradigms are ‘pre-ecological’, and so ‘ecofeminism interrogates the very foundations of mainstream feminism, by pointing to its complicity with the Western androcentric colonisation of the life world by instrumental reason’ (1997: 13). Plumwood is also perceptive on the point:

women, in this strategy [the liberal feminism of ‘uncritical equality’], are to join elite men in participation in areas which especially exhibit human freedom, such as science and technology, from which they have been especially strongly excluded … But the approach of liberal feminism fails to notice not only the implicit masculinity of the conception of the individual subject in the public sphere (and indeed the subject of post-enlightenment rational discourse generally), but also its other exclusionary biases, and fails to challenge the resulting bias of the dominant model of the human and of human culture as oppositional to nature (1993a: 27–28).

Thus, she insists that ecofeminism reject ‘approaches to women’s liberation which endorse or fail to challenge the dualistic definition of women and nature and/or the interior status of nature’ (1993a: 39). But she proceeds, nevertheless, to posit a family of all feminisms:

ecofeminism would also draw strength and integrate key insights from other forms of feminism, and hence have a basis for partial agreement with each. From early and liberal feminism it would take its original impulse to integrate women fully into human culture (1993a: 39).

As noted, it is difficult to find evidence of a similarly perceived family relationship to other ecofeminism. But it would not be difficult to make a case for the proposition that there is considerably more commonality between the projects of deep ecology (say) and ecofeminism than there is between liberal feminism and ecofeminism. Indeed, ecofeminism remains significantly more marginalised within broader feminist circles, wherein it is the object of considerable misgiving, than it is within environmentalism, wherein (I have claimed) it is now the predominant paradigm. Such an assessment is, however, one with which few ecofeminists are likely to agree.