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## The Power and the Promise of Ecofeminism, Reconsidered

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The Power and the Promise  
of Ecofeminism,  
Reconsidered

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# The Power and the Promise of Ecofeminism, Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

## *Introduction*

Ecofeminism is one of the newest varieties of feminism, and it seems to be one of the brightest. There's something appealing in combining feminist and ecological concerns, and something positively seductive in the implied possibility of one big solution out there somewhere that will end not only the oppression of women but the abuse of nature as well. There seems to be something right about ecofeminism too: it points out that our culture has formed a conceptual association between women and nature which certainly does seem to exist and certainly does seem to have undesirable consequences. And it points out a dichotomy between humans and non-human nature that is fundamental to our culture's world-view--this also certainly seems to exist and also certainly seems to have undesirable consequences.

However bright ecofeminism may seem, though, and however tantalizing the world-view of unoppressed women and unabused nature it offers, there are deep problems in ecofeminism's argument. These problems are of a magnitude that ultimately completely destroys ecofeminism's status as a defensible philosophical theory.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine ecofeminism. I will present its strengths fairly, but I will make it clear that its weaknesses far outweigh them. I will

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<sup>1</sup>My apologies to Karen Warren, whose article "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism" this title may seem a direct response to. That was actually the first ecofeminist article I read, and it certainly is one of the definitive works in the field. My paper, though, is not a direct response or reconsideration of the specific issues she deals with.

argue that although there does seem to be some truth in the underlying intuitions of ecofeminism, the position as it is presently formulated is actually incoherent. This does not mean, however, that its goals cannot or will not be realized. In fact, ecofeminists can and should look to the feminist critiques of science to see a valid and valuable connection made between feminist and ecological concerns. In ending the oppression of women, in particular by eliminating the genderization of scientific conceptualization and methodologies, a new relationship between humans and nature is developed. The results are totally compatible with the goals of ecofeminism; however, they are reached through different means, means which do not follow the strictly prescribed ecofeminist course.

In the name of clarification, a full half of the paper is a statement of what ecofeminism is--the present state of ecofeminist literature is such that a careful (and I think generous) formulation and explanation of ecofeminism is necessary before any real debate on its relative merits and faults is possible. So I begin with a section called "What Ecofeminism is." The section called "What Ecofeminism Isn't" is especially important in the process of clarification. It deals in particular with a set of views which are all too frequently alleged to be ecofeminism. I'll say what those views are, why they aren't a respectable form of ecofeminism, and why they deserve to be rejected in their own right. But the version of ecofeminism that I present is much more creditable, and it is that one (which I have to admit I think of as *real* ecofeminism) that I am concerned with. However, despite its enhanced credibility, this more respectable version still falls apart under two arguments.

In the next section, "The Argument Against Ecofeminism," I present my arguments against ecofeminism even construed in its most creditable form. This section is not long, because the arguments are not overly complicated; in fact, I think their real force is found in their simplicity. It's length may be deceiving--this section is actually the argumentative core of the paper.

Finally, in "A Possible Alternative: Feminist Critiques of Science" I offer a brief sketch of what feminist reforms of science have to offer those like myself, who cannot with a clear philosophical conscience subscribe to ecofeminism but would like to save and use what is good about it. This section is not by any means an exhaustive discussion, for that is not my intent. I merely want to offer a suggestion of a possible promising direction, and I think that the examination of these critiques, particularly of scientific objectivity, shows that they offer such promise.

We will see that ecofeminism has an important contribution to make to feminist philosophy, but the theory cannot be embraced in full. I will show that it is possible to use ecofeminism's intuitions and aims as a starting point and, while departing radically from its proposed course of action, ultimately achieve its goals.

## *What Ecofeminism Is*

Ecofeminism is "a sensibility, an intimation, that feminist concerns run parallel to, are bound up with, or, perhaps, are one with concern for a natural world which has been subjected to much the same abuse and ambivalent behavior as have women."<sup>2</sup>

Ecofeminism is "the position that there are important connections--historical experiential, symbolic, theoretical--between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding of which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics."<sup>3</sup> Ecofeminism advocates "withdrawing from old forms of male-female collaboration, not only because they restrict female access to some major

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<sup>2</sup>Jim Cheney, "Eco-feminism and Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 9: 2 (Summer 1987): 115-145, 115.

<sup>3</sup>Karen Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12:2 (summer 1990): 125-146, 125.

sources of power, status, and pleasure, but now, most centrally, because they express and support the insanity that is killing the world."<sup>4</sup> Most fundamentally, ecofeminism is the belief that "we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression, and vice versa."<sup>5</sup>

If nothing else is clear from the above articulations, at least this much should be: ecofeminism is the position that ecology and feminism are fundamentally related. So, before beginning to understand ecofeminism, it is first necessary to make clear what those two things are. Ecology in this context is not to be understood just as the scientific study of the relationships between organisms in an ecosystem, but the position that we must work to end the abuse of nature that is rampant in our society and is destroying the earth. It is the position sometimes called environmentalism (however, that term is misleading and detrimental to the goals of the ecological movement, for reasons that will be discussed later). There are of course many kinds of ecological theories and branches of the movement. The variety of ecology that ecofeminism draws upon is this: the cause of human's abuse of non-human nature is the culture-nature dichotomy that is implicit in and fundamental to our culture's world view. This dichotomy is a basic part of the conceptual framework that underlies our set of beliefs about ourselves and the world around us. This dualistic conception of the relationship between nature and culture leads to a belief that human culture is morally superior to non-human nature, and such a belief justifies human domination and mistreatment of the rest of nature. The mistreatment of non-human nature is harmful both to humans and to non-human nature, and in order for it to be ended, the underlying nature-culture dichotomy must be eliminated and a new, more mutually-respectful relationship between humans and the rest of nature must be built.

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<sup>4</sup>Doris Dinnerstein, "Survival on Earth: the Meaning of Feminism" in Judith Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1989),194.

<sup>5</sup>Janis Birkeland, "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice," in Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism; Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),19.

Feminism is the position that women are oppressed in our society and that such mistreatment should be eliminated. Even more so than in ecology, there are certainly many varieties of feminism and competing branches of the feminist movement. Again, though, there is one branch in particular that ecofeminism draws upon. The variety of feminism that is relevant to ecofeminism is this: the cause of women's oppression is the system of gender roles, and the way to end this oppression is to alter this gender role system. The system of gender roles is deeply embedded in the conceptual framework of our culture. They prescribe feminine and masculine characteristics that in turn prescribe behavioral roles for females and males.<sup>6</sup> These roles include, but are not at all limited to, the following: men are rational, strong, and aggressive; women are emotional, passive, caring, and dependent. Femininity and masculinity are by definition complementary, and the way they are defined includes the inferiority of the feminine. In order to end the oppression of women, it is necessary to change the definition of gender roles (perhaps eliminate them altogether). It is important to stress from the outset that by this view, to be a feminist view does not require that women hold a special or superior place; it requires only the commitment to freeing women from oppression. In other words, feminism is best understood as anti-sexism.

The important move that ecofeminism makes in order to combine ecology and feminism is adding the claim that the reason the feminine is considered inferior to the masculine is its association with nature. The socio-historical association between woman and nature is ecofeminism's starting point. It is important to understand the process that has created and perpetuated this association. In 1978, in a work some claim began ecofeminism, Susan Griffin offered an explanation: Griffin's *Woman and Nature; The Roaring Inside Her* is a prose poem documenting the historical

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<sup>6</sup>This is a good time for me to make a distinction that needs to be made. When I use the word *gender*, I refer to this: gender is a social construction, and the categories of feminine and masculine are conceptual categories. In contrast, what is sometimes referred to as a person's gender--whether she or he belongs in the biological category of female or male--is correctly referred to as *sex*. The terms "woman" and "man" are slightly more problematic, but I will use them as synonymous with "female" and "male."

associations made between woman and nature.<sup>7</sup> She traces in chronological order the different attitudes that have been advanced throughout the history of western societies about women, about nature, about women's nature, and about the natural woman. In the main section of the book, "Matter; How Man Regards and Makes Use of Woman and Nature," Griffin begins with the beginning of Christianity and shows how it serves as a fundament for the association and the resulting negative view of both nature and women: "*Sic transit, how quickly pass, gloria mundi, the glories of this world, it is said.*"<sup>8</sup> The ultimate Christian goal is to rise above this earthly world and to go to heaven and be with God, who is eternal form and not matter. The human body is mere matter, and God gives it form and life when he puts a soul in. He did this for men and only for men. Women were created from the man's matter and have none of the Godly element in them. Therefore, they are tied to the material world and are inferior to men, who are connected to the eternal world.

Griffin goes on to show that the vast majority of our culture's scientific findings and intellectual endeavors have been designed or manipulated to support such a dichotomy, one that divides man/woman along the same lines as it divides form/matter, active/passive, and, most importantly for ecofeminism, human/nature. Many feminists in addition to Griffin have studied the way intellectual and scientific thought has supported the dichotomy. They argue that the time period most crucial to the association between women and nature is the Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, the framework of modern science was constructed. As Evelyn Fox Keller has pointed out, Bacon's view of science is representative of the attitude concerning the scientific ideal that the Enlightenment produced. He saw salvation in the power of man to use his distinctly human rationality to overcome the wildness of

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<sup>7</sup>Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature; The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). Nowhere in the book does Griffin use the word ecofeminism or present an argument for a specifically ecofeminist project. The implication, however, is clear.

<sup>8</sup>Griffin 14.



nature and harness the elements by his will. So, it became not only the scientific job but the moral responsibility of man to exert power over nature.<sup>9</sup> While this attitude toward nature was becoming firmly entrenched in the cultural mind, nature and woman were becoming more closely linked. The supreme belief of the Enlightenment was of course in the unique power of rationality. An important corollary was the belief that to become rational was to overcome the natural passions. This was an ability that had to be learned, and men were taught it, while women, whose constitution was simply too delicate to stand the rigors of such an education, were not taught it. Therefore, women could not become rational; the emotional, natural sphere was left to them at the same time it was relegated by science to an inferior-to-human status.

As a result of such beliefs advanced throughout history, the association of nature and women has become embedded in the conceptual framework of our culture. Nature and woman are both oppressed as a result of that framework. So, breaking down the conceptual framework of which that association is a part would liberate both nature and woman. Moreover, neither can be freed without doing so. It is the recognition of that connection which continues to be the most basic ecofeminist premise: as Lori Gruen puts it, ecofeminism is "analyzing the connections between woman and nature and offering alternative conceptions of how we should live in the world."<sup>10</sup>

To return to the point, then, the important move that ecofeminism makes is to recognize this association and claim that it is the reason the feminine is considered inferior to the masculine. Since nature is considered inferior in the nature-culture dichotomy, femininity is considered inferior in the feminine-masculine dichotomy. It is the same conceptual framework that causes the abuse of nature and the oppression of

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<sup>9</sup>Evelyn Fox Keller, "Baconian Science: The Arts of Mastery and Obedience," in *Reflections on Gender and Science*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>Lori Gruen, "Dismantling Oppression: An analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals," in Gaard, *Ecofeminism; Women, Animals, Nature*, 60.

women. As a result, it's impossible to achieve feminist goals without addressing ecology: the only gains possible are superficial ones unless the underlying ideology is changed, and changing the underlying ideology about women necessarily includes changing the closely related attitudes about nature. Likewise, it's impossible to achieve ecological goals without addressing feminism. It's not possible to only partially modify the conceptual framework, because that framework is a structure of interdependent, mutually reinforcing beliefs. Any feminist theory must therefore take into account femininity's association with nature and have as an end the end of the abuse of nature in order to be conceptually complete; any ecological theory must embrace feminist theories and concerns in the same way.

The ecofeminist goal is the adoption of a new attitude toward nature, one that realizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature instead of treating nature as a resource for filling human needs. The reason for adopting a new attitude is the desire to end the oppression of women as well as nature, not just prolong the environment's lifespan so that we can continue to use it. Such a change in attitude could only occur as a part of an entirely different cultural and scientific ideology than now is firmly in place, and it is just exactly that radical change in ideology that ecofeminists call for.

This articulation of the goal of ecofeminism reveals ecofeminism's relation to deep ecology. On the surface, and even at some depth, the two theories are similar. So similar, in fact, that at least one deep ecologist has wondered why they don't just call it deep ecology.<sup>11</sup> Because of this similarity, a study of the relation between ecofeminism and deep ecology--their similarities and especially their differences--is a great help in further understanding ecofeminism. Both ecofeminism and deep ecology are critical of society's environmental attitudes and practices, and both say that the

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<sup>11</sup>Warwick Fox, "The Deep Ecology-Feminism Debate and Its Parallels," *Environmental Ethics* 11: 1 (Spring 1989): 5-26, 14.

way to correct the attitudes and practices in question is to heal the split between nature and culture. But ecofeminism and deep ecology differ in a very important way.

Deep ecology says that humans have harmed the natural world by dominating it and using it as a means to their own well-being. The irony that deep ecology points out is that this treatment has actually ended in creating the ultimate threat to human well-being. And the problems that are present in ecology cannot be solved by making small adjustments and new regulations regarding human treatment of nature. What is needed is not "'shallow environmentalism,' the band-aid approach applying technological fixes for short term human goals."<sup>12</sup> What is needed, instead, is a different attitude toward nature. Instead of treating it as an environment--a background for human culture--humans should treat nature as an entity in itself, deserving respect and care. This new attitude toward nature can be accomplished by identifying one's self as a part of the whole, by echoing Albert Einstein in saying, "I am a little piece of nature." Then one realizes that since everything is basically one, to harm the rainforests, for example, is to harm one's self.

Deep ecology presented in this way sounds like the very kind of ecological attitude ecofeminists would favor. However, it is subject to some serious ecofeminist criticisms. The first is that the major political organizations of the deep ecology movement are headed almost universally by men, and their organizational structures are hierarchical.<sup>13</sup> This criticism, though, is somewhat superficial, since it doesn't object to the theoretical underpinnings of deep ecology but only the political manifestations. It is not a criticism of deep ecology's philosophy; it would be a philosophical criticism only if it were the case that such organizational structures arise from the theory. However, the managerial practices used in the particular political organizations are

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<sup>12</sup>Joanna Macy, "Awakening to the Ecological Self," in Plant, *Healing the Wounds*, 209.

<sup>13</sup>This kind of argument is discussed by Janis Birkeland. The objection is not like the one Robert Sessions claims ecofeminism makes, that deep ecology is masculinist in its "rather unified program" and because it is "logical," in "Deep Ecology versus Ecofeminism: Healthy Differences or Incompatible Philosophies?" *Hypatia* 6:1 (Spring 1991): 90-107, 93.

independent from the theory of deep ecology. In other words, this criticism would be more fruitfully directed at the particular organizations that are structured this way rather than the philosophical theory itself.

The more interesting and damaging criticism ecofeminism has of deep ecology is that the identification of self with all of nature deep ecology proposes does not actually result in changing the human-centeredness of the attitude toward nature. Rather, it reinforces it. This argument is best explicated by Val Plumwood. She argues that, although "deep ecology...seems initially to be likely to be compatible with a feminist philosophical framework, emphasizing as it does connections with the self, connectedness, and merger," it ultimately fails.<sup>14</sup> It fails because of the kind of identification it calls for between the individual and nature. The self-nature identity fails to create the interconnected web relationship between humans and the rest of nature that ecofeminism wants to see.<sup>15</sup>

Deep ecology proposes a self-nature identification that rejects boundaries between self and nature. Warwick Fox describes the central intuition of this account as follows: "We can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence...there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and nonhuman realms...to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness."<sup>16</sup> It is not just the particular boundaries between the human and natural realms that are artificial, though; deep ecology embraces a holistic cosmology of "unbroken wholeness which denies the classical idea of the analyzability of the world into separately and

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<sup>14</sup>"Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Hypatia* 6: 1(Spring 1991): 3-27, 11. Jim Cheney gives a similar argument, though not as clearly, in "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology."

<sup>15</sup>Plumwood discusses three versions of the nature-self identity: the indistinguishability account, the expanded self, and the transpersonal self. One main thrust of her argument is that deep ecologists themselves don't ever commit to one of these versions, wavering between them instead. However, Plumwood herself fails to clearly distinguish the three forms from each other. Correcting this flaw is well beyond my purpose in this paper, so I will discuss a nature-self identity that draws on all three versions indiscriminately.

<sup>16</sup>Fox, Warwick. "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time?" *The Ecologist* 14 (1984): 194-200, quoted in Plumwood 257.

independently existing parts."<sup>17</sup> Not only are humans and nature ontologically indistinguishable, but each part of the whole world is actually one thing.

An objection against such claims of indistinguishability, as Plumwood argues it, is that they fail to address the specific dualism that causes the harms done to nature, proposing instead the obliteration of all distinctions. This move, in its overgenerality, misses the point. To obliterate all distinctions not only goes further than is needed; it violates strong metaphysical intuitions. We shouldn't need to say, quite counter-intuitively, that my arm is ontologically indistinct from my pen in order to say that humans and non-human nature are engaged in a mutually dependent relationship. We should certainly recognize that nature isn't such a different *kind* of thing that it can be treated as a background for human culture, but we just as certainly don't need to say it's actually the same thing (this is closely related to the second objection below). What is needed, according to the goals of both deep ecology and ecofeminism, is a healing of the nature-human dichotomy in particular. The rejection of all ontological boundaries proposed by deep ecology's nature-human identification goes too far and the particular problem that is of concern gets lost sight of in the process.

A second objection is that entities in the natural world do in fact have needs distinct from human needs, and in order to be able to recognize those needs, we must first be able to recognize their ontological distinctness. In discussing interpersonal relationships, Jean Grimshaw says,

care for others, understanding of them, is only possible if one can adequately distinguish oneself *from* others. If I see myself as 'indistinct' from you, or you as not having your own being that is not merged with mine, then I cannot preserve a real sense of you well-being as opposed to mine. Care and understanding require the sort of distance that is

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<sup>17</sup>Arne Naess, quoted in Fox, "A New Philosophy?," quoted in Plumwood 257.

needed in order not to see the other as a projection of self or self as a continuation of the other.<sup>18</sup>

Plumwood argues that these points make as much sense in talking about the non-human natural world as they do when applied to other humans. The obliteration of all boundaries between humans and non-human nature, though, eliminates the ability to see nature's distinct needs. This objection, then, in addition to the overgenerality problem, discredits the indistinguishability account as a theory of self that will help develop an appropriate environmental ethic.

A last major objection from an ecofeminist standpoint is that this identification actually preserves the self-centeredness that it claims to eliminate. In order to get rid of the boundaries between self and nature, what must happen is that a person expands his/her conception of self to include those parts of nature that were previously considered outside of the self. In this way, deep ecology does not attempt to overcome the attitude of using the non-self as a means to achieving self well-being; it only enlarges the self that one is selfish about. As Plumwood puts it, "the motivation for the expansion of self is to allow for a wider set of concerns while continuing to allow the self to operate on the fuel of self-interest."<sup>19</sup> This criticism is discussed quite thoroughly by Jim Cheney: he makes the point that this can't be beat as a way to have one's cake and eat it too, but it ultimately doesn't work because there is no respecting the other as other. In this account, "the disappearance of the self is really self-aggrandizement on a grand scale."<sup>20</sup> Nature is really just dominated in a new way, by being taken into the concept of self: nature is first perceived as separate from the self, having its own identity. When it is taken into the self, no matter how expanded that self is, nature's own distinctness is lost and its identity becomes subservient to that of the

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<sup>18</sup>Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 182-3, quoted in Plumwood 258.

<sup>19</sup>Plumwood 258.

<sup>20</sup>Cheney 124.

new self. So the self-serving ego is allowed to continue to flourish. This preservation of the focus on self is an unacceptable consequence from an ecofeminist view, and it illustrates again why deep ecology is under fire from ecofeminism.

Let me now clarify what these criticisms of deep ecology say about ecofeminism. It is true that ecofeminism wants to restore a good relationship between humans and non-human nature by making us (us *humans*, not just us *women*) realize our connections with the rest of the natural world. It is necessary to mend this relationship because its present state of unconnectedness and separation is the cause of both the abuse of nature and the oppression of women. The image associated with ecofeminism's proposed world view is that of an interconnected web, where each person and each species is a knot in the web, with strands attached to every other knot. Each knot is individually formed and distinct from the other knots, but if any strand of the web is harmed or broken, it is felt throughout the entire web. Barriers--especially the dualistic attitude that conceives of nature as a background to human culture--cannot be placed between humans and nature. Just as importantly, neither can it be thought that all of nature is one entity, where different species are indistinguishable from one another. The entire natural world, including humans, should be conceived of as a system of interlocking parts, a mutually dependent and supporting community comprised of members with different but equally important needs. An ethic of love and care should be developed toward this community by humans. This conception of the relationship between humans and the rest of nature must replace the present attitude of human superiority and dominance over nature. Only when this happens can the abuse of nature end, and only when the abuse of nature ends can the oppression of women end.

## *What Ecofeminism Is Not*

In a recent book, Susan Hekman states that "eco-feminists want to posit an essential connection between women and the natural world that transcends history and culture. This thesis has become one of the fundamental tenets of the movement."<sup>21</sup>

Since January, 1989, *Ms.* has had an ecofeminism department as a regular feature in the magazine. The subject of the overwhelming majority of the pieces included under that category has been women's participation in various ecological movements. Typical is an article which laments the "self-centered antics" and the "eco-machismo" of the bearded members of the top environmental organizations, and reports on the alienating experiences of "three women who like everyone else we knew cared deeply about the fate of our planet, feeling excluded and bewildered," frustrated by the prevailing attitudes among "eco-dudes, mountain men, and granola boys."<sup>22</sup> By focus on women's struggle to achieve equal involvement in environmental-rescue organizations, *Ms.* implies that ecofeminism is just a movement to encourage women to participate in the larger environmental movement.

It should be obvious from the definition discussed in the previous section that neither of these examples properly qualifies as ecofeminism. Hekman is wrong: *positing* an *essential* connection between women and nature is the last thing ecofeminism wants to do. Ecofeminism wants to *recognize a historical* woman-nature connection, and in fact wants to get rid of the connection. And *Ms.* is equally wrong: ecofeminism is not just women involved in ecological campaigns or women complaining that they can't get involved to the extent that they would like.

Ecofeminism asks that people work towards ending all types of domination with the

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<sup>21</sup>Susan J. Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge; Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 118.

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth Larsen, "Granola Boys, Eco-Dudes, and Me," *Ms.* 2:1 (July-August 1991): 96-97, 96. Though this article is typical of the *Ms.* perspective of what ecofeminism is, there have been a few articles that do truly qualify as ecofeminist, e.g. Petra K. Kelly, "Beyond the Greens," 2:3 (Nov-Dec 1991): 70-71.



express purpose of ending the dual and theoretically linked oppression of nature and women; without that understanding and intent, a theory or action is not ecofeminist even if it is ecologically motivated and every last participant is female.

Misleading, and in fact completely mistaken, portrayals of ecofeminism such as these illustrate the need for a clear discussion of what ecofeminism is not and what ecofeminism does not and should not aspire to be. It is particularly disturbing that both of these examples of mistakes come from what should be expected to be knowledgeable feminist sources; one can only guess how lost the mainstream public must be if feminists themselves are this confused.<sup>23</sup> Views such as the ones discussed in this section are subject to harsh criticisms that are easily made, so if ecofeminism is construed to include these types of views, it is easily shown to be philosophically unsound. In fact, it is defeated *too* easily, because this is not ecofeminism. So, in the interest of fairness, let me clarify.

Ecofeminism is not the worship of Mother Nature. It does not say that women are naturally or essentially more in tune with the natural world. It does not say that women, in virtue of some such womanly in-tuneness, are able to be more loving and nurturing of nature. It does not say that women, in virtue of some such womanly ability to nurture, should be in charge of ecological rescue projects. It does not claim that "women possess an essential nature--a biological connection or a spiritual affinity with nature that men do not. While perhaps some women believe this, it is not a concept relevant to ecofeminism as such."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>I am assuming that these are honest mistakes, problems in understanding ecofeminism. This is not even to mention intentional misrepresentations such as in Janet Biehl's *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991). Biehl argues that ecofeminism is the acceptance of "a few basic themes: that women and nature are to be counterposed to Western culture; that women have an exclusive role in developing a sensibility of caring and nurturing; and that they are unique in their ability to appreciate humanity's interconnectedness with the natural world" (2). She never considers any other version (although she does argue that ecofeminism is splintered and rife with intra-movement contradiction, she never mentions any type of ecofeminism other than the particular one she argues against). This is too blatant to be anything but a deliberate misreading, and this major flaw undermines her entire argument.

<sup>24</sup>Birkeland, "Linking," 22.

There are theories that make claims like these and then claim to be varieties of ecofeminism. These kinds of arguments use the fact that the concept of femininity "has nurturing as its core: it centers on the image of woman as mother, as provider of food, warmth, and emotional sustenance"<sup>25</sup> to say that women have a special connection with nature that makes them more capable of caring for it than men are. In fact, the first usage of the word--when Francois d'Eaubonne introduced the term *ecofeminisme* in 1974 to bring attention to "women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution"<sup>26</sup>--implied something like this. Some versions today argue that women are in fact more in tune with nature and more fit to be nurturers, due to their biology. Others argue that the feminine role is a social construct, but that women, in playing that role, have gained experience that has given them a kind of nature-wisdom. Both kinds of arguments then go on to say that the problem ecofeminism should deal with is the devaluation of this nature-wisdom. The problem is not that women are linked to nature, but that the link, with all its possibilities for doing ecological good, isn't properly appreciated. These types of theories are appealing in one way: they offer women a perspective that allows them to believe that they are capable and what they know is worth something, instead of instilling in them the belief that they are lifelong victims of patriarchy. However, for these theories to be ecofeminist is impossible, as the following argument shows.

The link between women and nature is a construct of a patriarchal framework. So any theory that affirms that link is thereby affirming that framework as well. This might seem like an unlikely claim, but I maintain that it is true. The argument turns on the recognition of certain features of a patriarchal framework as defining and others as accidental. The tenets that define the framework are the ones that are importantly

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<sup>25</sup>Joyce Trebilcot, "Sex Roles: The Argument from Nature," in Mary Vetterlin Bragg, ed., *"Femininity," "Masculinity," and "Androgeny": A Modern Philosophical Discussion* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 161.

<sup>26</sup>Francoise d'Eaubonne, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974), 213-52.

conceptually connected and mutually reinforcing. To uphold one of these central tenets is to lend strength to the whole framework which in turn supports the other defining tenets.<sup>27</sup> Contrarily, feminist perspectives are those which challenge patriarchy as a destructive system and want to break down the framework. Therefore, a theory that is part of a patriarchal framework--such as one that affirms the link between women and nature--cannot be feminist. To claim that it could be is self-contradictory nonsense. And of course, as Victoria Davion so simply points out, "because these ideas are not feminist, they cannot be ecofeminist."<sup>28</sup>

Alleged versions of ecofeminism that attempt to convert the women-nature link, a link fixed firmly in place by patriarchy to justify the domination of both linkees, into a positive by affirming values such as openness and caring are fundamentally flawed. I agree with Davion that such views are better understood as *ecofeminine*,<sup>29</sup> since, in calling for the valuation of the feminine, they actually argue for the perpetuation of patriarchy's gender roles and therefore do not qualify as ecofeminist. And I further agree that such views are dangerous, because glorification of "the feminine role' is unlikely to provide genuine grounding for anything other than the oppression of women."<sup>30</sup> I have shown above that ecofeminine views do not qualify as ecofeminist. It might still be claimed, however, that these view have merit of their own and deserve equal consideration alongside ecofeminism. Again, though, these views are dangerous and do not deserve such consideration; I will next argue that they should be rejected in favor of ecofeminism.

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<sup>27</sup>Obviously, I haven't named those tenets that are patriarchy's defining ones; that identification process in any framework would surely be quite difficult, and it's certainly beyond the scope of this discussion. What's important for this point is the acceptance of the assertion of the link between women and nature as one of those central tenets.

<sup>28</sup>Victoria Davion, "How Feminist is Ecofeminism?," in Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce, eds., *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book; Philosophy, Ecology, Economics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co, 1994), 288-295.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. 288.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. 291.

There are two main reasons to reject ecofeminine theories. First, an empirical argument is available to disprove the claim that women, by way of their feminine characteristics, are better suited to care for nature. The feminine role itself, since it does not prescribe only being a nurturer, but also looking and behaving certain ways and performing prescribed societal functions, calls for many acts that harm nature: "The damage to the ozone layer that is done by aerosol cans used to package hairsprays is one example, the cruel testing of cosmetics on animals is another."<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the wearing of furs as the ultimate feminine status symbol and the use of toxic cleaning products in fulfilling the feminine role of housewife--the list of distinctly feminine attacks on nature goes on and on. All this evidence flies in the face of the argument that women playing the feminine role are closer to nature, or treat nature better, than men playing the masculine role.

A deeper criticism of ecofeminine viewpoints, a criticism more to the feminist point, is that the "feminine ideal" cannot exist apart from its masculine counterpart and the rest of the patriarchal system of which femininity and masculinity are a cornerstone. Gender roles are constitutively defined as complementary--part of the definition of feminine is to be submissive to the dominant masculine, so that definition wouldn't make sense in the absence of masculinity. To keep, *as feminine*, what is seen as positive about the feminine requires keeping the entire concept of femininity. This means that keeping nurturing and caring, admittedly positive values, as part of a conception of femininity means the necessary masculine complement includes as a part of its conception *not* nurturing and *not* caring. Of course it's acceptable to keep the values that are associated with feminine--ecofeminism's desired value system is indeed based on nurturing and caring rather than protecting and controlling. But these can't be kept as feminine values, because to keep them as such requires keeping the

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<sup>31</sup>ibid. 291.

rest of femininity and the entire construct of patriarchal gender roles of which it is a part. As Biehl puts it, the claim "that 'nurturing' characteristics that the present society presumably despises are in fact badly needed now if we are to overcome our ecological crisis is indisputable".<sup>32</sup> What must be avoided, though, is associating the needed characteristics with the female, because conceptions of woman such as these, based on received definitions of women's nature and role, are oppressive whether promoted by men or by alleged feminists.

The goal of ecofeminism is nothing less than a complete overthrow of the underlying cultural framework that is so pervasive that it is not even recognized as being socially constructed. We can't keep any part of any of the institutions that patriarchy has established, including the package deal of the feminine ideal, because they all are rooted in hierarchical power relationships and the belief that we are atomistic competitive individuals. Those are the very beliefs that ecofeminism denies and the very structures that ecofeminism wants to get rid of. Indeed, "the nurturing, more-naturally-peaceful stereotype is a fast ticket to keeping us barefoot and pregnant."<sup>33</sup> It is better that we reject these ecofeminine theories in favor of ecofeminism, with an attitude such as the one Judith Plant voices: "we women will not be held responsible for cleaning up the patriarchal mess by ourselves because we are told we are more able. No, not this time. The message of ecofeminism is that we *all* must cultivate the *human* characteristics of gentleness and caring."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Biehl, *Rethinking*, 12

<sup>33</sup>Lindsay Van Gelder, "It's Not Nice to Mess with Mother Nature," *Ms.* 7: 7-8 (Jan-Feb 1989):60-63, 61.

<sup>34</sup>Judith Plant, "Toward A New World: An Introduction," *Healing the Wounds*, 3 (emphasis added).

## *The Argument Against Ecofeminism*

Ecofeminism thus presented is an appealing position. It is a theory that unites concern for the ecological future of our planet with concern for the status of women in society to produce a "genuinely anti-hierarchical and enlightened movement, one that could oppose sexism and the many forces that are at work in destroying the biosphere and trammeling human freedom."<sup>35</sup> I argue, however, that this is a false seduction: for all its apparent promise, ecofeminism is philosophically unsound.

Ecofeminism's central claim is this: because of the socio-historical association between women and nature embedded in our conceptual framework, ecology and feminism are conceptually related. Therefore, each must embrace the other's theory and goals in order to be either philosophically complete or politically effective. There are two central criticisms of this argument: first, that the claim of necessary embracing is patently false; and second, that the argument as a whole is internally inconsistent. The purpose of this section is to fully explicate these objections and show that they refute ecofeminism at its most fundamental level.

The first objection is leveled at ecofeminism's assertion that ecology and feminism *must* cooperate in order to achieve their goals, i.e. that neither a movement to end the oppression of women nor one to end the abuse of nature can be complete or successful without taking the other into consideration. This assertion is simply false--it is entirely possible to imagine that the goals of ecology could be met while those of feminism are left unmet. It is perfectly conceivable that our society could come to the realization that, unless we reform our treatment of the natural world we live in and with, we are dooming ourselves to certain destruction. And it is perfectly conceivable that, as a result of this realization, we could completely reform our behaviors, modifying all

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<sup>35</sup>In the introduction to *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, Biehl says this is what she hoped ecofeminism would be. She goes on to argue that it has not lived up to this potential, but most ecofeminists would say this is exactly what the movement is still successfully working toward.

our daily practices that inflict harm on nature. For example, we might cut down the use of electricity, stop the manufacture of toxic chemicals in everyday products, and implement one-hundred percent recycling programs on a society-wide scale. There would certainly be no more disposable diapers. And it is perfectly conceivable that these things could occur with complete success without liberating women in the least. In fact, if the feminine role is kept intact and expanded to accommodate these changes, women's lives could actually be made worse. It would fall to women performing the feminine role of homemaker to implement all the changes in the household: women would do all the sorting and preparing to recycle, women would perform household chores without the aid of electronic appliances and chemical cleaners, and women would wash the diapers.

Likewise, it is entirely possible to imagine that the the goals of feminism could be met while those of ecology are left unmet. It is perfectly conceivable that our society could come to the realization that more productive and happy lives are possible for everyone of both sexes if we treat people as people instead of forcing them into prefabricated gender categories. It is perfectly conceivable that, as a result of this realization, we could completely reform our behaviors, modifying all our processes of socialization that teach children to be properly feminine and masculine. A person's sex would no longer be the determining factor in assigning social roles: jobs would be evenly distributed between women and men, and each individual would do what her or his own skills are best suited for. But, most importantly, it is perfectly conceivable that this feminist revolution could occur with complete success without liberating nature in the least. It could well happen that, as has happened many times before, nature might be used and abused in the name of progress. Nature could still be regarded as a background for the now-more-civilized-than-ever civilization.

It is true that, as a simple matter of fact, the occurrence of either an ecological or feminist revolution might very well have positive effects for the other movement. For

instance, the changes that would occur to make our society ecologically responsible might restructure daily life so that women were not overburdened with the duties traditionally associated with the feminine role. However, this does not save ecofeminism: this sort of relief from oppression would be nothing but a happy accident. However much of an improvement this might be in the state of women's lives, it would not actually be a feminist revolution; it would be an accidental effect of a general societal trend, not the result of the change of attitude and belief that feminism requires. For the resulting improvement in women's lives to count as a genuinely feminist reform, it would have to be done on purpose and for the right reasons. Feminists could indeed be glad that women's lives were easier, but it would not be a true gain unless the underlying attitudes and beliefs that had been the actual cause of the oppression were changed. So it is not enough of a response for an ecofeminist to say that the two *might* happen together, or one *might* have accidental positive effects for the other. That is true, but ecofeminism's original claim is that the two *must* happen together, and, as I've shown, there is good reason to believe that this is not the case.

It is also true that the occurrence of one revolution might make it easier for the other to happen. An ecofeminist might argue that this indicates the two are related as ecofeminism claims. However, all this actually indicates is that the two forms of domination are related in the trivial way that all such forms are. All forms of domination are related in that they stem from an attitude of superiority.<sup>36</sup> Either of these revolutions would be a major society-wide change, and it would teach us ways to accomplish other major society-wide changes. But ending the domination of nature and ending the domination of women are no more conceptually related than are ending the dominations of anything else.

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<sup>36</sup>Karen Warren explains how this works according to the "logic of domination" in "Critical Thinking and Feminism," *Informal Logic* 10: 1 (Winter 1988), 31-43.



It is perhaps most true that it would be a good thing if both the domination of nature and the domination of women were ended. I don't think any ecofeminist would actually argue that the fact that it would be good if both dominations were ended together makes it true that they must be ended together, but in a way it's the only argument left to them. I do want to make it clear that I understand that this is the motivation behind trying to make it true, and that I consider it a perfectly noble motivation. But, however good it would be, the two projects are not necessarily connected as ecofeminism claims.

The second objection also attacks the claim that the women-nature association requires that the dominations of women and nature be ended at the same time, but for a different reason. This claim is inconsistent with ecofeminism's first claim, that the women-nature association is purely historical and sociological. If the association has been formed by sociological processes, then it should be able to be taken apart in the same way. If it can be taken apart like this, then feminism and ecology can proceed independently. If the link no longer existed, the two dominations wouldn't be conceptually associated, and the two theories would be dealing with separate problems. However, to say, as ecofeminism does, that feminism and ecology are necessarily dependent projects is to imply that the concepts of woman and nature cannot be unlinked. This is to say that the association is not just historical or sociological, but inherent in the concepts of nature and women. Let me show this in a way that makes the contradiction most clear, where (1) and (2) are the claims identified as ecofeminism's central tenets, and (2a) is a direct implication of (2):

(1): A link *formed by historical and sociological processes* exists between women and nature that causes their twin dominations.

(2): The domination of women and the domination of nature can only be ended together.

(2a): This is because the link between women and nature cannot be broken, i.e. it is *inherent*.

There is a direct contradiction between claims (1) and (2a). Ecofeminism's explanation of the association is self-contradictory. So, ecofeminism's two most central claims are contradictory, and the argument is thus internally inconsistent.

An ecofeminist might argue that claim (2a) does not follow from claim (2) in the way which I assert as obvious. To this, I would answer that ecofeminism does not offer any other explanation of why feminism and ecology must work together. There must be some reason that the two dominations must be ended together, and if it is not because the conceptual link between women and nature cannot be broken, another reason must be given. No such reason is offered; the explanation implied, therefore, is that the link is inherent in the concepts of woman and nature. A second response to my argument might be that I'm getting ecofeminism wrong, and that claim (2) really means something like it would be good if ecofeminism and ecology worked together, not that they necessarily have to. This, though, is simply an unsupportable claim. In the practically biblical text of ecofeminism, Karen Warren clearly states, "any feminist theory and any environmental ethic which fails to take seriously the twin and interconnected dominations of women and nature is at best incomplete and at worst

simply inadequate."<sup>37</sup> This sentiment is clearly and often echoed in the body of ecofeminist literature.

These two objections reveal ecofeminism's fundamental flaws and philosophical unsoundness. There can be no hope that ecofeminism will be a profitable enterprise in itself. This does not mean, however, that the goals of ecofeminism must forever remain unreached. Feminist work in the philosophy of science has identified problems related to those ecofeminism deals with, doing so without being subject to the kinds of criticisms that prove ecofeminism unsound.

## *A Possible Alternative: Feminist Critiques of Science*

Feminist critiques of science might offer an alternative to ecofeminism, one that could go a long way toward accomplishing the goals of ending the oppression of women and the domination of nature but that isn't subject to the grave philosophical criticisms under which ecofeminism crumbles. In this section I will give an overview of these critiques and discuss their possible success in achieving ecofeminist goals.<sup>38</sup> This is not by any means an exhaustive discussion, as I do not intend it to be. I merely want to suggest that the science conceived of by feminists is a legitimate alternative to ecofeminism, one that should give disillusioned ecofeminists hope.

There are a wide variety of feminist criticisms of science.<sup>39</sup> For example, the scientific community is guilty of unfair employment practices similar to those found in

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<sup>37</sup>Karen J. Warren, "Power and Promise," 125.

<sup>38</sup>This is a major subject of a large volume of work in recent years, and my treatment of the subject is grossly lacking in depth. The best full examination of the subject is Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>39</sup>Evelyn Fox Keller discusses several of these in "Feminism and Science," in Richard Boyd, Philip Gasper, J.D. Trout, eds., *The Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 279-288, reprinted from S. Harding and J. O'Barr, eds., *Sex and Scientific Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago

other historically male fields. Female scientists, after years of being female science students and being subtly and directly discouraged from pursuing a scientific career, have to fight to get and keep jobs their work merits. Since work in the sciences usually depends on receiving research grants, it is easy to simply not award grants to projects with scientists named Joan and Susan at their head. Aside from the basic financial disadvantage this creates for women, it translates into further career problems--without independent research work and publishing, female scientists cannot receive tenure in academic positions.

Another feminist criticism of science is that there is a sexist bias in the choice and definition of the problems it addresses. A prominent example of this bias is in the research done on issues of health; women's issues have not and do not receive the same level of scientific attention that men's do. Along with the choice of problems, feminists criticize the bias in the design and interpretation of experiments. If an experiment using human subjects is designed to use a majority of male subjects, the results from the female subjects well may be classified as deviant.<sup>40</sup> If the experiment were designed in an unbiased manner, female results would change the contour of the norm that the experiment defines instead of being conceived of as deviating from it.

These types of feminist criticisms of science point out some of the scientific community's practices that need changing. For example, fair employment practices could and should be followed.<sup>41</sup> Projects could and should be chosen with equal concern for women's lives, and experiments could and should be designed in a way

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Press, 1987), 233-246. She puts them in order from least to most radical. For my purposes, these are all about the same level of non-radicalness, as opposed to the theoretical critique I am mainly concerned with.

<sup>40</sup>Carol Gilligan discusses the universality of this phenomenon in the construction of psychological models in *In a Different Voice; Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>41</sup>It is sometimes argued that the inclusion of women scientists in the field would in itself clear up other problems of sexism--having a "woman's point of view" would balance out the male perspective. This seems wrong to me, and I would argue instead that it is the inclusion of (male or female) feminist scientists that is needed to rid science of its gender bias.

that included female data equally. These are all fairly clear remedies that could be effected without altering the underlying structure of science itself. There is, however, a deeper level of criticism. At this more philosophical level, it is pointed out that criticisms like those listed above actually only deal with the superficial symptoms of the real underlying bias in science. This real problem is that the conceptual underpinnings, the definitive methodologies, and the implicit and explicit goals of science are skewed. Examining this bias requires questioning the underlying ideology of science, in particular the assumption of scientific objectivity.

In modern mythology, science is regarded as the ultimate bringer of knowledge and truth, and one of the main reasons for the high degree of reverence it is accorded is its status as a method of inquiry that is by its very nature "objective." Science claims to provide a view of the world that is objective in two seemingly very different but related ways. First, the scientific method guarantees that the procedure of gathering knowledge is not influenced by the scientist. Instead, scientific procedures "let the data speak for itself"--they provide a way to get at reality in itself without anything in the way. Second, scientific projects are value-free in that the social and political environment in which the project is carried out plays no role in determining the course of the science done. The relationship between the two forms of objectivity is this: science is objective in the first sense because it is objective in the second. Actually, both varieties of alleged objectivity are suspect.

First, I will address the first claim of objectivity--that science methods are objective in that they produce objective truth about the world they investigate. As Helen Longino puts it, "in this sense to attribute objectivity to science is to claim that the view provided by science is an accurate description of the facts of the natural world as they are; it is a correct view of the objects to be found in the world and of their relations with each

other."<sup>42</sup> This scientific ideal is based on the idea that there is reality that is out there waiting to be discovered, and that the proper role of the scientist is that of a passive observer who lets that reality speak for itself. These conceptions of the scientific process and the scientist's role presuppose that the scientist is capable of being a passive observer, and that reality appears to such observers as if through a perfectly transparent lens. The important feature of this variety of scientific objectivity is the scientist's objective distance from the object of observation. It is assumed that scientific observation is a process in which the object of observation appears undistorted to the disinterested observing subject. The situation is supposedly like that of a child playing in a room, unaware she is being watched through a hidden camera. This supposed distance that the observer has is the defining feature of scientific objectivity, and this objectivity is the defining feature of good scientific practice.

This conception of the way scientific purity is maintained through objective distance is flawed for this reason: experience is an event. To put it more accurately, perception is an event through which we experience the world. There is no such thing as reality merely appearing to us--two things about our makeup get in the way. First, our physical senses limit and select certain observations for us. There are some aspects of the world that we may never be able to get at cleanly or at all because they are too big or too small or too something else for our senses to be able to observe them. Second, we possess conceptual frameworks that allow us to interpret the world we are bombarded with, and these frameworks select and limit types of observation as well. The important point is that these conceptual schemas do not just allow us to interpret; they force us to. It is impossible to passively observe; the very act of observation necessarily involves interpretation shaped by our conceptual frameworks. The only way we can experience the world is through such an event of perception. We

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<sup>42</sup>Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge; Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 62.

cannot be objective in the sense that science claims, because to be that way would require an interpretive passivity on our part which is impossible to achieve.

It might be contended that the view I have presented is a straw man theory, because no scientist would actually claim that science is a transparent lens through which we observe reality in itself. To whatever extent scientists do acknowledge that such a view is a gross oversimplification, as most scientists certainly do, they would say that my presentation of it is a caricature. However, I would maintain that this is still the underlying ideology--scientific language still works to present science as a process that works this way, and the vast majority of the nonscientist population treats scientific finding as if they were received this way. Further, the admissions of contamination to perfect objectivity that scientists do make pertain to problems of our human physical limitations getting in the way (e.g. Heidenberg's Uncertainty Principle). They do not acknowledge the equally problematic (and perhaps more so, for the very reason that it is not acknowledged) interference that our cultural conceptual framework causes.

The second claim of objectivity--that science is value-neutral--is just as faulty. In Longino's description, "in this sense to attribute objectivity to science is to claim that the view provided by science is one achieved by reliance upon nonarbitrary and nonsubjective criteria for developing, accepting, and rejecting the hypotheses and theories that make up the view."<sup>43</sup> However, as she elsewhere plainly puts it, "the idea that scientific methodology guarantees the independence of scientific inquiry from values or value-related considerations, that 'good science' is inquiry protected by methodology from values and ideology, is false."<sup>44</sup> If science were indeed value-neutral in the sense that it is untouched by questions of values, that would include the values that determine what is good and bad science. That would mean there was no

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid. 62.

<sup>44</sup>Helen Longino, "Can There Be a Feminist Science," in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, eds., *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 205.

such thing as good science or bad science, and it seems clear that not even the staunchest defenders of supposed scientific objectivity would claim that that is the case. This obvious point raises an issue that Longino deals with nicely:

"independence from these sorts of values, of course, is not what is meant by those debating the value freedom of science. The question is, rather, the extent to which science is free of personal, social, and cultural values, that is, independent of group or individual subjective preferences regarding what ought to be (or regarding what, among the things that are, is best)."<sup>45</sup> These values, generated from an understanding of the goals of science, are what she calls *constitutive* values. The personal, social, and cultural values they are contrasted with are *contextual*, indicating that they belong to the social and cultural environment in which science is done.

It is these contextual values that are in question--should they and/or do they play an important role in scientific inquiry? If they do, then the integrity of science is threatened.<sup>46</sup> Critics, including those following the line of criticism I'm presenting, say contextual values of course play a role in science--every instance of scientific observation involves at least one scientist, a person who possesses, in addition to a neurological constitution that restricts observational ability, a conceptual framework that underlies every belief, desire, action, every everything that s/he does. After all, "individuals do not spring naked from the womb into the social relations of the laboratory table. Those social relations are but an extension of the social relations of all the other tables of the culture--in kitchens, schoolrooms, locker rooms, and board

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<sup>45</sup> *Science as Social Knowledge*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Defenders of science's value-neutrality often concede that contextual values do exist and matter in scientific practice--for example, the conduct and results of most scientific projects are highly vulnerable to funding sources from corporate and/or government resources. They argue, though, that this type of palpable influence exerted by the social and cultural context on the directions of science just threatens the *autonomy* of science, but its justificatory value-neutrality remains untouched and its *integrity* is therefore happily intact. This issue is a discussion in itself that I'm neither able nor willing to open in this paper (Longino's discussion in both the Introduction and Chapter Five of *Science as Social Knowledge* is excellent); for my purposes here, I will take it for granted that the autonomy/integrity distinction does not stand up under argument, so contextual values do immediately threaten integrity.



rooms."<sup>47</sup> Scientists do not escape the processes of socialization that shape the way we view the world and our relation to it; they are not "limited to discourse and negotiation with one another, with their scientific traditions, and with 'nature,' as one would gather from the visions of science projected in science textbooks, histories, and philosophies."<sup>48</sup> Their picture of reality and, as a result, their science's picture of reality, is as inescapably influenced by that framework as every experience any of us have, whether garbed in a white lab coat or not.

What is necessary is a redefinition of just what values science operates under. Those values might be something like this: good science is science that allows us to better understand the world we live in, and good science is science that makes accurate count of all the factors involved instead of pretending its a transparent process. A scientific process should aim toward truth, accuracy, and explanatory power. It is also necessary to admit that the scientist's personal values and the social context in which science occurs do play a role in forming the way a particular scientific inquiry is conducted. Science must acknowledge the contributions the scientist makes to each instance of observation and interpretation and realize that the presence of such contribution doesn't make bad science. Recognizing the mind's contribution to scientific experience need not force us to relinquish our belief that science can tell us about the world. It does mean that we need to realize that what science can tell us about the world basically is what we can tell ourselves about the world--the scientist's mind is perhaps the single most informative ingredient in any scientific proceeding. So, true objectivity is what Piaget tells us it is:

Objectivity consists in so fully realizing the countless intrusions of the self in everyday thought and the countless illusions which result...that the preliminary step of every judgement is the effort to exclude the intrusive self. Realism, on the contrary, consists in ignoring the existence of self

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<sup>47</sup>Harding, *Science Question*, 73.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.* 73.

and thence regarding one's own perspective as immediately objective and absolute....So long as thought has not become conscious of self, it is a prey to perpetual confusions between objective and subjective, between the real and the ostensible.<sup>49</sup>

True objectivity lies in recognizing that what we have thought of as objectivity is not objective at all, but merely presumptuous. To be objective, the scientist must take pains to fully account for all the ways in which her or his presence in the inquiry makes a difference. To recognize what aspects of self are intruding in each instance of observation and to understand what result those intrusions might have on the subsequent interpretation and drawing of conclusions is to be truly objective.

The obvious question at this juncture should be how this improved version of objectivity is to be attained. I would like to offer an explanation that is not as radical as might be feared.<sup>50</sup> It comes down to this: the traditional conception of objectivity is right, but it's not as easy as we've always acted as if it is. We, because of both our physical and conceptual makeup, necessarily contaminate each and every event of perception we engage in, including those events of perception that are acts of scientific observation. Reality is there in itself, and scientific inquiry does offer us a lens through which to get at reality, but we have to work very hard to make the lens clean enough to see through. In most cases, we can do that.<sup>51</sup> It requires scientists to clearly formulate and articulate what the particular interferences and biases of their situation are, first to themselves so that they can eliminate any blind assumptions they can before they infect their methods and interpretation, and secondly as a part of their findings so that the scientific community as a whole can be aware and evaluate the

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<sup>49</sup>Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1972), quoted in Keller, "Feminism and Science," 282.

<sup>50</sup>Until now, I have basically been loyal to the general line of criticism that feminists take toward science. With what I have to say here about the new conception of objectivity, I deviate from what they generally have to say—the line should continue and say that improved objectivity will require a dramatically new epistemology.

<sup>51</sup>My metaphysical beliefs require me to point out that there are probably some cases in which we simply cannot get at reality cleanly. Science properly done gives us our best chance, and we do get at it plenty well enough to make radical skepticism practically impossible.

results in light of the underlying values. This is the kind of realization of the intrusion of the self that Piaget recommends, and it is the kind of realization that would reform science.

At this point in the analysis, it may still be unclear where the sexism is in the objectionable traditional conception of objectivity. It may be that it seems convincing that traditional objectivity has more than enough problems that require reform without even making it a feminist issue. This is true, but from a feminist standpoint, it is also important to recognize the gender bias in the traditional conception of objectivity and to see the distinctly feminist need to reform the underlying ideology. After all, "there is not masculinist and feminist science, just good and bad science."<sup>52</sup> This does not mean abandoning feminism or the feminist critiques of science, though. It's a restatement of this point: it is the worship of false objectivity that is male-biased, so getting rid of that is a feminist improvement; however, that improvement won't make science feminist, just gender-neutral and therefore better. Let me make the point explicitly and clearly: objectivity as it is conceived in the scientific enterprise is a gender-biased concept because this sort of objectivity is a masculine value.

Carol Gilligan, in *In a Different Voice*, discusses the difference between two modes of thought. The first is the psychologically "normal" voice, one that values objectivity, justice, and rationality. The second, the "different" voice, values emotion, interpersonal relationships, and subjectivity. The first is the masculine voice and the second is the feminine.<sup>53</sup> This means that the first set of values are part of the definition of the masculine and are associated with men, and the second set are part of the definition of

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<sup>52</sup>Longino, "Can There Be," 203.

<sup>53</sup>In defense of Gilligan, who I think is largely misunderstood and misrepresented, she does not intend to define inherent male and female ways of thinking. She says this in her introduction: "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex" (2).

the feminine and are associated with women. The important point for the purposes of the present discussion is to note that objectivity is featured prominently in the set of masculine values.

Nancy Chodorow explains how objectivity is associated with masculinity in her writing about gender role formation and object-relations theory.<sup>54</sup> The argument basically is this: masculinity is defined through the achievement of separation, while femininity is defined through the maintenance of attachment. The crucial cause of this is the institution of motherhood: "in a society where mothers provide nearly exclusive care and certainly the most meaningful relationship to the infant, the infant develops its sense of self mainly in relation to her."<sup>55</sup> Children of both sexes form a strong sense of identity with their mother and then, as they learn to perceive themselves as an individuated self, they must separate from the mother. However, the ways in which girl children separate is different from the ways in which boy children separate. Girls, though they do end the primary identification with the mother, form a new identification as they develop a gendered personality. Since the primary caretaker is a female and femininity and female role activities are immediately apprehensible in the world of her daily life, girls develop a different but still strong identification. For boys developing a gendered personality, though, the break from identification with the mother is sharper. Further, since they do not have an immediately present masculine figure with which to identify in gender formation, the definition of masculinity is largely in negative terms--that which is not feminine.

The consequence of this difference in girl and boy children's relationships with their mother during gender formation is that autonomy--separateness--becomes a masculine characteristic, while it is feminine to remain connected to others.

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<sup>54</sup>Two works of Chodorow's are particularly pertinent: *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) and "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

<sup>55</sup>Chodorow, *Reproduction of Motherhood*, 78.

Masculinity is defined through the achievement of separation, while femininity is defined through the maintenance of attachment. The achievement of autonomy is the first step toward scientific objectivity because the scientist's separateness from the object under observation is what makes objectivity possible. So, since it is masculine to achieve autonomy, it is masculine to be objective; thus, it is masculine to do science.

This shows that objectivity as conceived scientifically is a masculine trait and a masculine value. As Evelyn Fox Keller argues, autonomy and objectivity tend to pave the way for more harmfully aggressive attitudes: "the ideological ingredients of particular concern to feminists are found where objectivity is linked with autonomy and masculinity, and in turn, the goals of science with power and domination."<sup>56</sup> When a boy child succeeds in separating himself from his mother, his new condition of "autonomy is double-edged: it offers a profound source of pleasure, and simultaneously of potential dread." Denying connectedness can easily lead to "alienated selfhood," to "defensive separateness."<sup>57</sup> In negotiating the transition from symbiotic union to the recognition of self and other as autonomous entities, the child does not want to cut himself off from the other completely, and the new psychological relationship available is that of mastery of the other. This way some kind of connection is maintained, but the child does not perceive himself as dependent on his mother. As Jessica Benjamin writes, "the original self assertion is...converted from innocent mastery [of the self] to mastery over and against the other."<sup>58</sup>

This result of the attempt to master the other is clear in interpersonal interaction: if a person believes he is completely separate from other people, the natural inclination

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<sup>56</sup>Keller, "Feminism and Science," 282. I'm not completely convinced by Keller's argument, and it's a point in the argument that I'm uncomfortable committing myself to agreeing with. I think that just showing that traditional objectivity is a masculine concept is enough to require it to be reformed. This part of the argument linking objectivity to domination, though, is important in bringing into clear focus the effects on the goals of science that these reforms would have, and seeing that is important in making connections with ecofeminism. And it is at least plausible enough to warrant discussion.

<sup>57</sup>Keller, "Feminism and Science," 283.

<sup>58</sup>"The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 144-74, 165, quoted in Keller, "Feminism and Science," 284.

is to try to display his superiority over the others. And that result is abundantly clear in science: if scientists believe humans are separate from nature, nature is seen as the enemy and the need to understand it is in order to conquer it. When the belief in the separateness of humans and nature is coupled with the association of nature--the scientific object--with the feminine, science's goal of domination becomes clearly a feminist issue. And we must question the reasons behind that goal: "what are the specific human objectives that are sought in the domination of nature? The conventional answers--control over the environment, the augmentation of human power in the world, 'relief of the inconveniences of man's estate,' and so forth--will no longer suffice."<sup>59</sup> If such reasons ever were compelling, they certainly are not now, for humans have achieved enough mastery of nature to live comfortably. Now, instead, the only possible reason is the desire to dominate in itself. Keller poses the question in a different way: "under what circumstances is scientific knowledge sought for the pleasures of knowing, for the increased competence it grants us, for the increased mastery (real or imagined) over our own fate, and under what circumstances is it fair to say that science seeks actually to dominate nature."<sup>60</sup> Again, the answer is that the primary goal of science is to dominate nature, and the other goals, if a consideration at all, are secondary. The surest way to prove one's autonomy from something or someone else is to hold that something else at a distance, and the surest way to prove that it is at a distance is to make it inferior. This is the role science plays in the relationship between humans and nature, and it is this role that needs to be drastically reformed.

The goal of science should be reconceived of as understanding nature instead of dominating it. A good example of a scientist who has done this is Barbara McClintock. In a biography of McClintock, Keller relates this: "She was talking about the deepest

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<sup>59</sup>William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 101.

<sup>60</sup>Keller, *Feminism and Science*, 284.

and most personal dimension of her experience as a scientist. A little later she spoke of the 'real affection' one gets for the pieces that 'go together': 'As you look at these things, they become a part of you. And you forget yourself. The main thing about it is you forget yourself.'<sup>61</sup> Obviously, a scientist who is forgetting herself is not concerned with dominating nature, but communing with it. McClintock's most famous statement of scientific method also emphasizes entering into a cooperative relationship with nature: "she tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you.' Above all, one must have 'a feeling for the organism.'"<sup>62</sup>

It should begin to be clear what this line of criticism and the reforms it suggests have in common with ecofeminism. Feminist critiques of science point out that the construction of gender roles, specifically the definition of autonomy and objectivity as masculine traits, create a deeply entrenched bias in scientific ideology. The way to make science a gender-neutral pursuit is to reconceive objectivity in a way that doesn't rely on masculine autonomy. Objectivity should be understood as a process that recognizes scientists' own subjectivity instead of pretending it isn't there. The relationship between scientist and scientific object should be understood as a connected and cooperative one. This new relationship accomplishes the ecofeminist goal of healing the human-nature split. The goal of science should become understanding the natural world instead of dominating it. After all, "scientific knowledge itself does not result in the 'control' of external nature."<sup>63</sup> To alter the goal of science so that it was understanding rather than dominating would mean ending the oppression of nature. And this whole process would stem from a change in gender role construction, a change that if implemented fully would end the oppression of

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<sup>61</sup>Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism; The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: W.H. Freeman & Co, 1983), 117.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. 198.

<sup>63</sup>Leiss, *Domination*, 122.

conceptual link and that link's profound implications for our culture's world view. However, what it does with that link is not defensible.

Ecofeminism should not be ignored, though, especially by feminism. In revealing and examining the women-nature association, it has a valuable contribution to make to feminist theory. On an overly simplistic level, it proposes a simple solution for the liberation of women: if the cause of women's oppression is their association with nature, then break that association and women will no longer be oppressed. On a deeper and more important level, ecofeminism makes the point that any feminist theory must go to the level of conceptual frameworks and examine relationships between attitudes there if it is to be complete. It points out that the oppression of women cannot be considered an issue separate from the abuse of nature, and that should point out that all forms of domination are interconnected. Any feminist theory, then, must take this into consideration--any theory that aims to end the domination of women cannot treat the problem as if it exists in a bubble.

Once it is acknowledged that ecofeminism makes this crucial observation, the question becomes one of what to do with the enlightenment that observation provides. I hope I have shown that feminist critiques of science at least begin to answer that question. These criticisms also suggest that the way to end the twin dominations of women and nature is to make changes in the conceptual framework to remove gender bias. The program these criticisms propose does not have the rhetorical appeal of ecofeminism's claim of uniting ecological and feminist concerns in one all-encompassing theory, but it has something ecofeminism does not--it makes sense as a defensible theory. People who find ecofeminism's intuitions and goals compelling should turn in this direction to find a theory that really might work.

Ecofeminism is not the answer, but it should not be ignored. At the very least, it offers an interesting observation on the cause of two serious problems in our society. And perhaps it is best understood as just such an interesting observation. Perhaps,



though, it has even more to offer. In examining it and exposing its terrible inconsistencies, another theoretical course might be suggested, one that might go a long way toward reaching the answers ecofeminism wanted to find in the first place. And those are answers that are definitely worth reaching.

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