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Gender, Eco-feminism and the Environment

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Ecological Animalism versus Ontological Veganism

There is an intense and unresolved debate within environmental philosophy between positions extending ethical concern only to (some) animals and positions emphasising ethical concern for ecological systems and all living things. This choice between animals or ecology is reflected in eco-feminism in a debate over hunting and vegetarianism, as a complex debate between gynocentric versus critical eco-feminist positions. Both sides of this debate oppose contemporary animal abuse and express solidarity with and care for animals as part of disrupting human/nature dualism and apartness. Critical eco-feminism shows how a third position, an Ecological Animalism, can draw the animal and ecology positions closer together, and also resist the gender-stereotyping and essentialist appeal of some feminisms to a gentle, passive and peaceful 'woman's nature' that is culturally invariant and incapable of hunting or killing animals.

Feminist thinking, critical eco-feminists urge (Sturgeon 1997; Plumwood 2002), must recognise the full diversity of women's lives in diverse cultures where the meaning of hunting and eating other animals is variable. In contemporary US and modern urban contexts, recreational hunting of wild animals often has a strongly gendered meaning of establishing masculinity as toughness, aggression, male bonding based on excluding women, and suppressing 'soft' emotions such as sympathy – all features mobilised in warfare. But hunting can have a very different meaning in the context of foraging societies where animals are respected but some animal food is essential for survival in a limited ecosystem. If the meaning of hunting is culturally variable, the dangers of gynocentric and culturally invariant concepts of women reside especially in their potential for fostering cultural hegemony via falsely universalising the experience and perspectives of privileged (e.g. white urban) women and obscuring those of other women.

For example, from an anti-colonial eco-feminist perspective, the sweeping assumption that 'women' do not hunt and that female-led 'gathering' societies were vegan or plant-based (Collard 1989; Adams 1994: 107) presupposes a culturally universalist model of human life as modern Western urban life, along with a gendered dualism of foraging activities in which the mixed forms of hunting and gathering encountered in many indigenous societies (e.g. Australian Aboriginal societies where women routinely hunt smaller animals) are denied and disappeared. The gynocentric feminist tendency to universalise and decontextualise 'woman' and to privilege explanations blaming men and masculinity means that the cost-cutting economic rationality behind contemporary animal debasement is neglected in Adams' theoretical framework.

Both gynocentric and critical eco-feminisms agree that modern factory farming abuses animals. Farm animals have never been as cruelly confined or slaughtered in such numbers in all human history as they are under modern 'rational' farming systems. The factory farm today is crowded and stinking, full of suffering animals that are sprayed with pesticides and fattened on diets of growth hormones, antibiotics and drugs. Two hundred and fifty thousand laying hens may be confined within a single building with hardly space to move or stretch, unable

to peck or nest. But people opposing these abuses face an important set of choices about how to theorise and extrapolate their opposition. In particular, they have to choose whether to opt for theories of animal ethics and ontology that emphasise discontinuity and set human life apart from animals and ecology (Adams 1993, 1994), or theories that emphasise human continuity with other life forms and situate both human and animal life within an ethically and ecologically conceived universe. They also have to decide between theories that attribute the abuse of animals in farming systems to individual weaknesses such as greed for meat, or instead to capitalist systems of rationality and profitability that minimise animals' share of the world and reduce them to commodities or resources for consumption.

This choice appears in two eco-feminist theories that challenge, in quite different ways, the ideology of human/animal dualism. Ontological Veganism is a theory that advocates individual consumer abstention from all use of animals as the only real alternative to factory farming and the leading means of defending animals against its wrongs. But another theory which also supports animal defence, Ecological Animalism, more thoroughly disrupts human/nature dualism, and is better than Ontological Veganism for environmental awareness, for human liberation, and for animal activism itself.

Ecological Animalism supports and celebrates animals and encourages a dialogical ethics of sharing the world and negotiation or partnership between humans and animals, while undertaking a re-evaluation of human identity that affirms inclusion in animal and ecological spheres. Ecological Animalism is a context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position, which advocates great reductions in first-world meat-eating and opposes reductive and disrespectful conceptions and treatments of animals, especially as seen in factory farming.

As we have seen, the dominant position that is deeply entrenched in Western culture constructs a great gulf or dualism between humans on one side and animals and nature generally on the other. Human/nature dualism conceives the human essence as mind or spirit, not body; humans are inside culture but 'outside nature' – not conceived ecologically as part of a system of exchange of nutrition and never available as food, for example, to other animals. Non-humans are seen in polarised and reductive terms as outside ethics and culture, and as mere bodies, reducible to food (Midgley 1983; Luke 1995; Weston 1996). Ecological Animalism aims to disrupt this deep historical dualism by resituating humans in ecological terms at the same time as it resituates non-humans in ethical and cultural terms. It affirms an ecological universe of mutual use, and sees humans and animals as mutually available for respectful use in conditions of equality. Ecological Animalism insists we must consider context to express care for both animals and ecology, and to acknowledge at the same time different cultures and individuals in different ecological contexts, differing nutritional situations and needs.

Ontological Veganism has numerous problems for both theory and activism, animal equality and ecology. It ties strategy, philosophy and personal commitment tightly to personal veganism, abstention from eating and using animals as a form of individual action (Adams 1993, 1994, 2003). It insists that neither humans nor animals should ever be conceived as edible or even as usable, confirming the treatment of humans as 'outside nature' that is part of human/nature dualism, and blocking any reconception of animals and humans in fully ecological terms. Because it is indiscriminate in proscribing all forms of animal

use as having the same (low) moral status, it fails to provide philosophical guidance for animal activism that would prioritise action on factory farming over less abusive forms of farming. Its universalism makes it highly ethnocentric, universalising a privileged 'consumer' perspective, ignoring contexts other than contemporary Western urban ones, or treating them as minor, deviant 'exceptions' to or departures from what it takes to be the ideal or norm (Adams 1993, 1994; Eaton 2002). Although it claims to oppose the dominant ideology of apartness, it remains subtly human-centred because it does not fully challenge human/nature dualism, but rather attempts to extend human status and privilege to a bigger class of 'semi-humans' who, like humans themselves, are conceived as above the non-conscious sphere and 'outside nature', beyond ecology and beyond use, especially use in the food chain. In doing so it stays within the system of human/nature dualism and denial that prevents the dominant culture from recognising its ecological embeddedness and places it increasingly at ecological risk. Ontological Veganism's subtle endorsement of human/nature dualism and discontinuity also emerges in its treatment of predation and its account of the nature/culture relationship. Predation is often demonised as an instrumental practice bringing unnecessary pain and suffering to an otherwise peaceful vegan world of female gathering. But if instrumentalism is not the same as simply making use of something, and even less thinking of making use of it (ontologising it as edible), predation is not necessarily a reductive or instrumental practice, especially if it finds effective ways to recognise that the other is more than 'meat'. Ecologically, Ontological Vegans present predation as an unfortunate exception and animals, like women, as always victims: fewer than 20 per cent of animals, Adams tells us, are predators (Adams 1993, 2003) – a claim that again draws on a strong discontinuity between plants and animals. In this way it is suggested that predation is unnatural and fundamentally eliminable. But percentage tallies of carnivorous species are no guide to the importance of predation in an ecosystem or its potential eliminability.

An Ecological Animalist would say that it is not predation as such that is the problem but what certain social systems make of predation. They would agree that hunting is a harmful, unnecessary and highly gendered practice within some social contexts, but reject any general demonisation of hunting or predation, which would raise serious problems about indigenous cultures and about flow-on from humans to animals. Any attempt to condemn predation in general ontological terms will inevitably rub off onto predatory animals (including both carnivorous and omnivorous animals), and any attempt to separate predation completely from human identity will also serve to reinforce once again the Western tradition's hyper-separation of our nature from that of animals, and its treatment of indigenous cultures as animal-like. This is another paradox, since it is one of the aims of the vegan theory to affirm our kinship and solidarity with animals, but here its demonisation of predation has the opposite effect of implying that the world would be a better place without predatory animals. Ontological Vegans hope to avoid this paradox, but their attempts to do so reveal clearly that their worldview rests on a dualistic account of human identity.

The main move Ontological Vegans make to minimise the significance of predation and block the problematic transfer of their antipredation stance from humans to animals is to argue that human predation is situated in culture while animal predation is situated in

nature (Adams 1993: 206; Moriarty & Woods 1997). One paradox is that animal activists who have stressed our continuity with and similarity with animals in order to ground our obligation to extend ethics to them now stress their complete dissimilarity and membership of a separate order, as inhabitants of nature not culture, in order to avoid a flow-on to animals of demonising all predation. Embracing the claim that humans 'don't live in nature' in order to block the disquieting and problem-creating parallel between human hunting and animal predation introduces a cure which is worse than the disease and which is basically incompatible with any form of ecological consciousness. The claim that humans are not a part of natural ecosystems is on a collision course with the most fundamental point of ecological understanding because it denies the fundamental ecological insight that human culture is embedded in ecological systems and dependent on nature. It also denies an important insight many students of animals have rightly stressed: that culture, learning and choice are not unique to the human and that non-human animals also have culture. In fact Woods and Moriarty's solution rests on a thoroughly dualistic and hyper-separated understanding of human identity and of the terms 'nature' and 'culture'. In order to attain the desired human/animal separation, nature must be 'pure' nature, 'strictly biological', and culture conceived as 'pure' culture, no longer in or of nature: an activity is no longer natural if it shows any cultural influence, and culture is completely disembedded from nature, 'held aloft on a cloud in the air'.

Of course Ontological Vegans are right to object to any simple naturalisation of human hunting and meat-eating. For Ecological Animalism, both the claim that meat-eating is in nature rather than culture and the counter-claim that it is in culture and therefore not in nature are wrong and are the product of indefensible hyper-separated ways of conceptualising both these categories that are characteristic of human/nature dualism. It is only if we employ these hyper-separated senses that the distinction between nature and culture can be used to block the flow-on problem that condemning predation in sweeping terms also condemns animal predation. For critical eco-feminism, any form of human eating (and many forms of non-human eating) is situated in both nature and culture – in nature as a biologically necessary determinable and in a specific culture as a determinate form subject to individual and social choice and practice. Both naturalising and culturalising conceptual schemes are inadequate to deal with the problem, since both sides deny the way our lives weave together and crisscross narratives of culture and nature, and the way our food choices are shaped and constrained both by our social and by our ecological context.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Conventional animalist and conventional ecological theories as they have evolved in the last four decades have each challenged only one side of this double dualist dynamic, and they have each challenged different sides, with the result that they have developed in highly conflictual and incompatible ways. Although each project has a kind of egalitarianism between the human and non-human in mind, their partial analyses place them on a collision course. *The ecology movement has been situating humans as animals, embodied inside ecological systems of mutual use, of food and energy exchange, just as the animal defence movement has been trying to expand an extension to animals of the (dualistic)*

human privilege of being conceived as outside these systems. Many vegans seem to believe that ecology can be ignored and that the food web is an invention of hamburger companies, while the ecological side often retains the human-centred resource view of animals and scientific resistance to seeing animals as individuals with life stories of attachment, struggle and tragedy not unlike our own, refusing to apply ethical thinking to the non-human sphere. A more double-sided understanding of and challenge to human/nature dualism can help us move on towards a synthesis, a more integrated and less conflictual theory of animals and ecology, if not yet a unified one.

Eco-feminists are increasingly taking on the environmental theory generated by traditional male philosophers to sketch a different vision of human relationship to the non-human world, for example in the intense and long-running debate among environmental theorists over human-centredness (anthropocentrism). Environmental philosophers have debated whether our relationships with nature are distorted, destructive and irrational because our framework of thought is human-centred, or whether human-centredness is, as some urge, the only possible way for humans to relate to the world. This stereotypical debate presupposes a false choice between human and non-human interests and sides of the environmental problem (Plumwood 1998). This false choice between self and other, human and non-human, that is so entrenched in the framework of environmental ethics discussion is well exemplified in work by historian of environmental thought Peter Hay (2002). Hay begins by identifying the environmental problematic completely with what is really only part of it, compassion for other life forms. In his first chapter introducing the 'ecological impulse' and motivating the environment movement, Hay proceeds immediately to identify the paradigm of environmental activism as wilderness defence. 'The cornerstone of the environment movement', he writes, 'may well be the impulse to defend . . . the existential interests of other life-forms' (Hay 2002: 25).

Eco-feminism reformulates both human and non-human sides of the problem as an outcome or expression of the *human/nature dualism* that in Western culture deforms and hyper-separates *both sides* of what it splits apart (Plumwood 2002; Merchant 2003). This analysis escapes the false choices between human and non-human, instrumental and intrinsic, prudential and ethical, self and other, because it sees our failures in situating non-humans ethically and our prudential failures in failing to situate our own lives ecologically as closely and interactively linked. Countering the human/nature dualism associated with human-centredness gives us two tasks: (re)situating humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms. The first is apparently the more urgent and self-evident, the task of prudence or care for self, while the other is presented as optional, the inessential sphere of ethics or care for the other. But this is an error; the two tasks are interconnected, and cannot be addressed properly in isolation from each other.

To the extent that we hyper-separate ourselves from nature and reduce it conceptually in order to justify domination, we not only lose the ability to empathise and to see the non-human sphere in ethical terms, but we also get a false sense of our own character and location that includes an illusory sense of agency and autonomy. The reductive mindset that refuses to see the non-human other in the richer terms appropriate to ethics (Weston 1996, 2004; Plumwood 2002) licenses supposedly 'purely instrumental' relationships that distort our perceptions

and enframings, impoverish our relations, and make us insensitive to limits, dependencies and interconnections – which are thus in turn a prudential hazard to self. The eco-feminist focus on the larger political and historical context of human/nature dualism can give us a fuller, more integrated and coherent conception of the environmental problematic, broadening the narrow 'deep' focus on non-human and wilderness issues to represent more closely the full range of issues and concerns in real environmental struggles.