
Ecofeminism

Women, Culture, Nature

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with editorial assistance from Nisvan Erkal

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington and Indianapolis

1997

Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy

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The majority of books, articles, and lectures on ecofeminism have included the now-familiar litany of dualistic constructs to be rejected: femininity/nature/body/emotion/connectedness/receptivity/the-private-sphere are devalued in Western societies and considered to exist in service to their "superior" counterparts in the dualistic world view, masculinity/culture/mind(spirit)/reason/autonomy/aggressiveness/the-public-sphere. Hence it seems appropriate to focus attention on ecofeminist alternatives to a dualistic interpretation of the world. Although various conceptualizations of a relational, interdependent understanding of reality have been put forth by ecofeminist philosophers, they generally stop far short of accepting a radical nonduality and, indeed, tend to dismiss it as disreputable, for reasons I shall cite presently.

A minimalist sense of nonduality accepts that persons and other entities in nature are autonomous subjects that exist in some sort of interdependent relationship with other subjects. Radical nonduality goes further and asserts the existence of unitive dimensions of being, a gestalt of a subtle, unitary field of form, motion, space, and time. My purpose in this chapter is to encourage ecofeminist philosophical consideration of radical nonduality.

I begin by examining the context for this discussion: the resistance among many ecofeminist philosophers to acknowledging unitive dimensions of being, which are denied by both modern and deconstructive-post-modern world views. In the second section, I suggest a phenomenological appreciation of experiential knowledge of unitive dimensions of being. In

the final section, I discuss ontological implications of an orientation I call "ecological postmodernism" that are relevant to ecofeminist philosophy, radical nonduality, and the concerns cited in the first section of this article.

There Goes the Neighborhood

An ecofeminist philosopher whose work I respect read an early version of this chapter and sent me a friendly but quite alarmed letter, peppered with capitalized phrases and much underlining. If I would just drop any mention of unitive dimensions of being in discussing alternatives to dualism, she painstakingly explained, I would be accepted by academic ecofeminist philosophers! Alas, I cannot do that and remain true to my experience, but the incident did serve to highlight the current restrictions on acceptable philosophical orientations.

There are three major obstacles to moving radical nonduality into the neighborhood of respectable philosophy: (1) the pervasive scientific and objectivist dismissal in modern Western cultures of that which cannot be quantified and is more subtle than matter, (2) the grip of deconstructive postmodernism on much contemporary intellectual (particularly academic) thought, and (3) feminist suspicions of nonduality based on patriarchal interpretations of it.

Prejudices of Modern Western Philosophy

The cultural inheritance from the modern Western tradition clearly predisposes most contemporary philosophers to devalue organicism and nonduality as a rather immature and primal clinging to a failed romanticism that was properly displaced by various analytical orientations. The alternative of deconstructive postmodernism, while claiming to constitute a radical break from Western tradition, continues the habit of antipathy toward nondualistic apprehensions and generally dismisses them as "magical thinking." The deconstructionist orientation in philosophy champions a neorationalism that has merely been refocused in scale from the "universal" to the local, particular context; many of the familiar prejudices of Enlightenment rationalism remain intact. *

A second cultural objection to nonduality stems from the modern Western enthronement of the individual. Within that orientation, the perception of an essential, protective separation between the self and the rest of the world—a radical discontinuity—is of paramount importance. Hence the self is felt to be threatened with obliteration if unitive dimensions of being are recognized. This rejection of nonduality—that is, the defense of the core Western dualism of self versus world—is often expressed with intense emotion. Clearly, nonduality is misconstrued as an annihilating

monism. I and others, however, understand *nonduality* to mean a dynamic system of relations wherein any particular manifestation functions simultaneously as a distinct part and the unbroken whole. The parts are not derivative of the whole, nor vice versa. Each aspect constitutes the other. Metaphors of a web or a net are often used by nondualists, but they seem to me not quite dynamic enough to convey subtle processes of wholeness and diversity, of nonduality and particularity.

Deconstructive-Postmodernist Attitudes

This orientation emphasizes the social construction of knowledge and asserts that conceptual traditions of knowledge ("discourses") are framed and elaborated to serve the controlling forces in a culture or subculture. If the deconstructive project involved solely a massive challenge to conceptual modes of domination throughout the status quo, what feminist could object? Indeed, similar analytical work by feminists and other activists long predates the emergence of deconstructive postmodernism. The expansion of such work is a welcome development.

Of great concern to me, however, is the ideological baggage that comes with the world view of deconstructive postmodernism. Deconstructionists (also called "constructivists") make a leap from noting that concepts are socially constructed to concluding that there is *nothing but* social construction in human experience. Every human perception appears to them to be socially invented in a particular time and place—*except* perceptions of difference, particularity, and inherent autonomy. The perception of "nothing but difference" is believed by deconstructionists to be the sole island of neutrality from which one can scan social construction for 360 degrees.

To this orientation, the most offensive perceptions are those that are opposite of supposedly pure difference and autonomy: any recognition of a unitive dimension of being. Perceptions of difference are accepted as obvious truth, while perceptions of an inherent continuity are dismissed as "a fictive unity." Investing perceptions of difference and particularity with the conceptual weight of being *the fundamental reality* is most certainly not a neutral position; it is an ideological choice. What proof exists within the epistemic grasp of humans that there is "nothing but difference" in human society, the earth community, and the cosmos? Their a priori categorical denial of the possibility of any inherent unity in the cosmos and human affairs must necessarily sweep under the rug a wide range of perceptions to the contrary, as I shall discuss. Most ecofeminist philosophers who subscribe to the assumptions of deconstructive postmodernism, however, stop far short of the extreme "Lone Cowboy ethos" that informs many of the works by the founding fathers of that movement.

The widespread insistence by deconstructionists that all relationships

are political, that is, constructed of power relations, influences the ways in which ecofeminist philosophers may interpret attention to a unitive dimension of being. They point out correctly that idealist constructions of unity and organicism have been used politically to oppress people in several historical contexts. From such examples they deduce that *solidarity* (of thoroughly discrete beings) is an acceptable concept, but *unity* is not.¹ I feel that their extension of political philosophy to all ontological apprehensions of the cosmos is quite limiting. It is based on the deconstructionist belief that *all* relationship is inherently power-laden, or "political." Even the myriad subtle relationships that are other than human-to-human?

For some ecofeminist philosophers influenced by this orientation, the cosmological processes explored in contemporary physics are distrusted as being the construction of "a dubious metaphysical holism," while certain observations from field ecology that emphasize the importance of "discrete and relatively disconnected or autonomous holons and hierarchical levels of organization" are embraced as the "informed" version of ecological theory. The latter body of data is valued far more highly than either postmodern physics or holistic ecological observations for being relevant to evolving theories of ecosocial ethics and morality because the antiholistic perspective is believed to protect one from arriving at supposedly false perceptions of organicism.²

Feminist Concerns

Ecofeminist philosophers also find expressions of a holistic identification of self with nature, as put forth by various male philosophers, to be problematic for reasons that are rooted in gender politics. For example, deep ecology's sense of the expanded self, or "ecological self," is immensely unappealing if it can be construed to mean the expansion of the male ego to cosmic proportions ("Le cosmos, c'est moi!").³ I personally do not read that meaning in Arne Naess's coining of the term *ecological self*; certain other male deep ecologists, however, give good cause for concern. A related feminist criticism of deep ecology's recommendation of a gender-neutral, expanded, ecological self is based on recognition that "the self" is socialized quite differently in men and women. Since men in modern-Western-patriarchal cultures derive social status from being culturally elevated above the natural world while women in those societies are devalued as part of the natural realm, the two sexes cannot very well pursue the same path to an enriched sense of self in an ecological age.⁴

A second area of feminist concern focuses on the fact that Western women in general have traditionally been socialized to cultivate a sense of permeable, loosely defined boundaries of their self-identity *in order to* put themselves in malleable service to the needs and demands of others around

them. Hence the idealizing—by male ecophilosophers who are often dismissive of ecofeminism—of expansive, arbitrary boundaries of the self calls forth concerns about female exploitation.

Experiential Knowledge of Radical Nonduality

The chilly reception accorded to recognition of unitive dimensions of being in most contemporary philosophical circles warms somewhat, especially among ecophilosophers, if the concept of nonduality is limited to meaning "interdependence" or "interrelatedness" of autonomous entities. Such an alternative to dualistic thinking is acceptable to many ecofeminist philosophers who reject any stronger, or more radical, sense of nonduality. I believe, however, that paying attention to the evidence for a radical nonduality—which is located largely in types of knowledge that have been marginalized and devalued by the modern, objectivist orientation—yields ample cause to reconsider the dominant conceptualizations of acceptable epistemology.

In a variety of circumstances, humans have perceived an inherent and continuous systemicity within the unfolding universe, a constitutive unity that exists *along with*, not instead of, manifestations of particularity and subjectivity. Ecophilosophy would be enriched by recognizing that human perception can be polyvalent, that different kinds of perception can occur, many of them nonlinguistic. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge *scale* in perception: discontinuity may seem obvious at one level of perception but absent at other levels.

Female Body Parables

To discuss experience rooted in female physicality in ecofeminist philosophical circles today, one must first respond to the ready charge of "essentialism," the deconstructionist insistence that "woman" is entirely a social construction and that any assertion of women's experience is "totalizing" and oppressive to the individual. I feel that the essentialist debate has been framed too crudely: the issue is not a universal, essential feminine personality structure but, rather, the question of whether the fact that females, in all our particular and cultural diversity, bleed in rhythm with the moon and have the capability to grow people from our flesh, as well as transform food into milk for the young, has any effect on the ways in which we experience life. Deconstructive "antiessentialism" slams the door on that question—viewing gender as noteworthy social construction drawn from the dumb body, just as culture is usually understood to be constructed from dumb nature—but I feel that ecofeminism should explore it.

The erotic processes of the female body-mind often yield states of consciousness that can be appreciated as "body parables," expressions and reminders of unitive dimensions of being that underlie the supposedly fixed delineations of separateness. In the postorgasmic state many women experience a peaceful, expansive mind state of free-floating boundarylessness. Indeed, the clitoris seems to exist for no other purpose than erotic pleasure, an experience that can be the passage to expanded consciousness during and shortly after orgasm. On the first day of menstruation a woman sometimes experiences a sense of soft boundaries of her body-space. In pregnancy and childbirth, the delineation between me and not-me can seem blurred and somewhat elusive. In nursing, while cradling the extension of her flesh to her breast, a woman again may experience a dreamy sense of soft boundaries. All of these greater or lesser immersions into experiencing nonduality teach one that although separateness and discrete boundaries can be important in this life, they are not absolute. Rather, other perceptions of the world are just as real, even though they receive almost no validation in official modern Western culture.

Perceived Unity with Nature

A second mode of experiencing nonduality can occur through immersion in natural surroundings, such as the deep silence one can encounter on wilderness trips when the dualistic habit of perceiving self apart from nature gradually loses its grip and the apparently fixed boundary between inner and outer seems to become permeable and gives way, at times, to a palpable sense of being at one with the surroundings. People often experience less intense versions of the same phenomenon at the seashore, in a large park, or in a backyard garden.

The Magical, Unitive World of Young Children

A third type of experiencing nonduality reportedly occurs cross-culturally among young children. Many of them commonly perceive a magical, felt connection with their world in general or with particular objects such as a tree or an animal. Their organic orientation is generally suppressed and denied by socialization in Western cultures, yet a great many adults remember at least an impression of that mode of being in which boundaries were quite permeable and the world was perceived as being vividly alive and unified.

Sudden, Unexpected Apprehensions of Nonduality

Experiencing awareness of a unitive dimension of being can also occur at quite unexpected moments, not necessarily connected to particular set-

tings or activities. Describing such experiences in retrospect, people often report that their consciousness was grasped, suddenly and usually fleetingly, by an intense awareness of the unity of all being. A biologist at Oxford University established a research project during the 1970s in which he and his staff gathered and classified over four thousand accounts of such experiences. A typical account of a unitive experience was related by an individual who was walking down Marylebone Road in London and "was suddenly seized with an extraordinary sense of great joy and exultation. . . . all things living, all time fused in a brief second."⁵ Such revelatory encounters with a unitary dimension of being may be *extraordinary*, but they are not *supernatural*. They would more accurately be labeled *ultranatural*, a journey into the cosmological nature that lies within the world that Westerners tend to perceive as an aggregate of discrete fragments bound by such forces as gravity and electromagnetism.

The Unitive World Views of Indigenous Peoples

Throughout much of the complex cultural diversity of native nations runs a commonly expressed perception that the earth is alive and humans are not separate from it or from the rest of the cosmos. Traditional native peoples generally apprehend the Great Family of All Beings as consisting of forms that are diverse manifestations of the boundless Great Holy, or Great Mysterious. As ecofeminists have come to learn more about native cultures, many have experienced a resonance in the native holistic orientation, which finds countless assumptions of Western epistemology to be absurdly discontinuous.

Meditation and Related Practices

In numerous cultures, both Eastern and Western, traditions of mental practices have been passed down through generations because they preserve efficacious techniques whereby one can experience nonduality. Such practices include various forms of Buddhist meditation, raja and bhakti yoga, Sufi dancing, and contemplative exercises in Christianity. The specific techniques vary a great deal, but the fact that an organic and unitive perception emerged in so many different cultural contexts indicates the presence of something more than mere social construction.⁶

Holistic Perceptions in Contemporary Science

The mechanistic and objectivist orientations in Western cultures have not yielded to the considerable scientific evidence for a holistic world view. Many scientists are coming to realize that we can no longer make sense of reality except as an evolving whole in which we ourselves are situated.⁷ In

cosmological terms, the perceptual shift is moving from the modern sense of our surroundings as a collection of discrete objects undergoing events that are unconnected except for the effects of local forces to a sense that all interactions are manifestations of unified primordial "universe activity."⁸ That is, the universe is not just a thing but also a mode of being that has been continually unfolding since the time of the primordial fireball. Every being has its particular mode of existence (informed by events and relationships in its immediate context) and its universe mode of existence (informed by cosmological events and relationships)—or its microphase mode and its macrophase mode. Hence several physics experiments during the past twenty years, such as those establishing Bell's theorem of nonlocal causality, have demonstrated that it is not viable to think of a subatomic particle or event as being completely determined by its local circumstances; events taking place elsewhere in the universe are directly, instantaneously, and inherently involved. Focusing solely on the microphase mode of being yields a partially valid but limited understanding.⁹

The major shift in contemporary science is a movement from viewing nature as "a mechanics" (as did Descartes, Newton, and Bacon) not only to recognizing subjectivity in the natural world but also to recognizing immensely complex capabilities for self-organization and self-regulation in vast systems, or communities. The notion of "mind" is no longer limited strictly to an individual organism. Self-regulating "decisions," for instance, are apparently made continuously by the great biocybernetic system that has been called Gaia, our planetary home.¹⁰

Central to each type of observation of nonduality in the above list, which is by no means comprehensive, is the recognition of a continuous dimension of being that unites seemingly separate, discrete entities. Since recent discoveries in Western science are focusing attention on various examples of nonduality, perhaps a reconsideration will occur in Western philosophy, which has largely delegitimized discussion of the phenomenon.¹¹ Ecofeminist philosophy, with its particular interest in relational aspects of being (a focus shared by both feminism and ecology), might logically become a site of development—one among many—of the meanings and implications of acknowledging nonduality.

Ontological Implications of Ecological Postmodernism

I have proposed elsewhere a version of postmodernism that seeks transformation beyond the failed assumptions of modernity and focuses attention on the social construction of concepts—but does not make the leap to insisting that there is *nothing but* difference and social construction in human experience.¹² What I call ecological (or ecological/cosmological) postmod-

ernism acknowledges *both* the enormous role of social construction in human experience *and* our constitutive embeddedness in subtle biological, ecological, cosmological, and quantum processes about which contemporary Western society has only an extremely rudimentary level of understanding. When deconstructive postmodernists conclude that there is nothing to life but arbitrary social construction and utter groundlessness, they continue and intensify the diminished conceptualization of the human that was begun by Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment. These foundational movements of modernity cumulatively framed the human story apart from the larger unfolding story of the earth community. Deconstructive postmodernists shrink the human story even further, insisting that it is entirely a matter of power plays and language games. What is needed, *in addition to* exposing the power dynamics inherent in the "metanarratives" of the modern world view, is to break out of the conceptual box that keeps modern society self-identified apart from nature and to reconnect with a fuller, richer awareness of the human as an integral and dynamic manifestation of the subjectivity of the universe.

Ecological postmodernism asserts that there *is* a grounding for social construction and all other human endeavors. The human species does not conceptualize in pure autonomy, masterfully existing on top of nature. Yet even to discuss "grounding" or "autonomy" with relation to ecological postmodernism reveals the poverty of our inherited vocabulary. The "grounding" so central to ecological postmodernism does not refer to a foundational quantum field from which all physicality emerges as derivative manifestations. Rather, the vibratory field of matter/energy does not exist apart from its manifestations of form, which arise and pass away at the quantum level trillions of times per second. The "quantum soup" is not a base, or source, but part of the play of matter/energy. The grounding of human agency and subjectivity lies in a multiplicity of processes, such as one's genetic inheritance of behavioral predispositions; one's cognitive functions, which include the continuous resculpting of neuronal groups and pathways near synaptic interactions; the influence of bodily experience on metaphor, by which most conceptual thought is organized; the influences of landscape, weather, and other dynamics of one's bioregion on imagination and mood; the self-regulating dynamics of the body-mind; the effect of daily exposures to strong and weak electromagnetic fields; and the subtle manifestations of nonlocal causality and other relational dynamics that lace the universe.

If these aspects of human experience are acknowledged, one can accurately speak of the "autonomy" of an individual only by incorporating a sense of the dynamic web of relationships that are *constitutive* for that being at a given moment. We need new words—or, at the very least, some

means of distinguishing between the old "Lone Cowboy" sense of autonomy and the ecological/cosmological sense of uniqueness coupled with intersubjectivity and interbeing. The objectivist, mechanistic, and arrogant framing of a number of core concepts in the Western philosophical tradition inhibits the development of a deeply relational sensibility that is attentive to contextual dynamics of great subtlety.

Ecological postmodernism offers a conceptual framework with which ecofeminist philosophy might accept radical nonduality as a dimension of relational ontology. This orientation addresses the objections cited earlier from the deconstructionist, feminist, and modern perspectives. First, ecological postmodernism challenges the deconstructionist insistence that all relationship in human experience is inherently repressive with respect to (an idealized) autonomy. Cosmological, ecological, biological, and historically generated social relationships in and around an individual can evoke the unfolding of profound subjectivity, or interiority.

To the deconstructionist objection that any universal frame of reference is merely "substitutionalist universalizing" and is inherently "totalizing," ecological postmodernism responds that the universal, or cosmological, gestalt does not obliterate the gestalt of an atom, a cell, an organism, or a holonic subsystem within an ecosystem. Any particular level of focus will always yield partial knowledge and involve a larger context.

Regarding the feminist concern about the "ecological self" being interpreted by male ecophilosophers as an expansion of the masculine ego, one cannot rule out that sort of projection on the part of some, but ego aggrandizement is contraindicated by the appreciation in ecological postmodernism for the astounding diversity and profound *difference* in the universe.

The feminist concern that loosely defined boundaries of self have historically been encouraged for women in order to exploit them and the related fear that the modern construction of the individual would be annihilated by acknowledging radical nonduality are both addressed by the honoring of polyvalent perception in ecological postmodernism: the subjectivity of every manifestation in the universe is as real and precious as its far-reaching participation in systems of vast proportion.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for ecofeminist philosophy to look favorably on ecological postmodernism and its inclusion of radical nonduality in the search for alternatives to dualistic thinking is that humility and attentive engagement are called for in acknowledging the complex processual grounding of human existence. It is quite possible and even probable that human apprehension of the countless modes of dynamic relation will always be decidedly incomplete. Yet the perceptual habits of absolutist delineation and overbearing reductionism long imbued by dualistic thinking haunt contemporary efforts to move beyond patriarchal, authoritarian, exploitative societies to new possibilities. The ecofeminist critique of dualism

needs to be joined not only with an appreciation of pluralism but also with an open-minded consideration of unitive dimensions of being. An ontology based on dynamic and admittedly partial knowledge *as well as* awe toward the complexity of embodied and embedded existence would contribute substantially to the profound social transformation that is needed.

Notes

I would like to thank Carol Adams, Greta Gaard, Linda Holler, Charles Jencks, Mara Keller, Daniel Moses, Brian Swimme, Karen J. Warren, and Michael Zimmerman for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

1. See, for example, Christine J. Cuomo, "Unraveling the Problems in Ecofeminism," *Environmental Ethics* 14, Winter 1992, 358–59.
In a related vein, see Karl Popper, *The Open Society* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1991), although his alternative to idealist versions of holism, which he sees as the roots of fascism, is a scientific objectivism that would appeal to few ecofeminists.
2. See, for example, Karen J. Warren and Jim Cheney, "Ecosystem Ecology and Metaphysical Ecology: A Case Study," *Environmental Ethics* 15, no. 2, Summer 1993, 99–116.
3. See Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 6, no. 1, Spring 1991, 13–15.
4. See Marti Kheel, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology: Reflections on Identity and Difference," in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 129–32.
5. Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1.
6. A number of constructivist positions are presented in Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); rebuttals are presented in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
7. Wan Ho, "Evolution in Action and Action in Evolution," *Gaia and Evolution*, ed. Peter Bunyard and Edward Goldsmith (Camelford, Cornwall, England: Wadebridge Ecological Centre, 1989).
8. See Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), chap. 1.
Also see Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe: Scientific and Human Implications of the Emerging Paradigm of Evolution* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980); David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); and John Briggs and F. David Peat, *Turbulent Mirror* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

9. Ibid. Also see F. David Peat, *Einstein's Moon: Bell's Theorem and the Curious Quest for Quantum Reality* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990).
10. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), and *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* (New York: Norton, 1988).
11. As for the question of whether various kinds of perception of nonduality reveal various aspects of a *sole* unitive dimension of being or whether they reveal several *different* unitive dimensions of being, I do not know.
12. Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).