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# Feminism, ecology and the philosophy of economics

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### Abstract

The contemporary discipline of economics pays little heed to either the natural environment or to the work of women. A review of the literature on the historical development of western concepts of self and science shows that this is not coincidental. Rather than suggesting that ecological economics reinforce the identification of women with nature, however, feminist thought suggests that dualistic thinking about men and women, humans and nature can and should be replaced with a fuller picture of human identity and knowledge.

*Keywords:* Feminism; Economics; Ecology; Philosophy

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### 1. Introduction

Neither feminism nor ecology is a subject of polite conversation within mainstream economics. One might perhaps find talk about women-in-the-labor-force or about environmental-and-resource-economics to be acceptable, though considered non-central to the discipline. Going further to raise questions about the oppression of women or the destruction of ecosystems is, in most academic departments, a *faux pas* of the first order. Mere mention of ideas such as that gender might structure economic activities, or that natural constraints might put limits on economic expansion, is the intellectual equivalent of using the wrong fork at a formal dinner. One is marked as outside the pale: no doubt a man-hater, a

moon-dancer mystic, an earth-mother tree-hugger, a soft-in-the-brain alarmist, or an anti-intellectual rabble-rouser. Nor is the distrust limited to the neoclassical dining-table: feminists may distrust 'greens' and vice versa, and there are groups within both feminist and ecology circles in which admitting that one is an economist or a mathematical ecologist could be hazardous to one's health.

The purpose of this article is to clarify some of the philosophical bases of the resistance of mainstream economic thinking to feminist and ecological concerns, and in doing so, investigate ways in which feminist and ecological economics could best proceed. I use the term 'mainstream' to refer to academic economics as dominant in North America, that is, 'neoclassical' economics in its broadest sense. The point is that, far from being irrational or anti-intellectual, feminist and ecological thinking can present a richer picture of human identity and scientific methodology. In the light of this more adequate

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understanding, current economic thinking is itself revealed as narrow and biased. On the other hand, some of the proposals for alternative economics that may be advocated by feminist and ecologically-minded economists can be seen to be inadequate as well. The point of this paper is not to paint neoclassical economics as purely evil; the point is to outline critiques and cross-critiques, and suggest ways in which ecological economics could most profitably move forward. My own background is that of a neoclassically-trained economist and a feminist; research into ecology has been a more recent interest.

One unfortunate shortcoming in this article will be the lack of attention to the more concrete aspects of the relation of women to economics and ecology. Another will be the relatively short shrift given to racism and colonialism as other factors in the development and implementation of western economic thought. For these topics, I can and will only refer the reader to the influential work of Vandana Shiva (1988) and a recent insightful reflection on the issues involved by Bina Agarwal (1992). The present paper focuses only on the conceptualization of science, women and nature in the formation of modern economics.

## 2. Women and nature in neoclassical economics

Women and nature share similar treatment in neoclassical economics. They are, variously, invisible, pushed into the background, treated as a 'resource' for the satisfaction of male or human needs, considered to be part of a realm that 'takes care of itself', thought of as self-regenerating (or reproductive, as opposed to productive), conceived of as passive and/or considered to be subject to male or human authority. While study of 'natural resources' and of economic issues related to women and family are not entirely unknown in economics, it is the question of what is *not* studied that is most revealing. While these issues have been added around the margins of the discipline, they are absent at the core. The silence is deafening.

One would search in vain in the most paradigmatic models of economic production or growth for any inkling of where the materials used in production came from, or where the detritus from the

production process goes. Production is defined as taking place using only factors of capital and labor, period. In the first issue of this journal, for example, Paul Ehrlich (1989) pointed out how economists' 'circular flow' diagram is a perpetual motion machine which requires no inputs, while Paul Christensen (1989) called attention to the disappearance of material and energy resources from theoretical economics.

Similarly, one would search in vain in most descriptions of human agents for a discussion of where economic agents come from, or where they go when they are broken or used up. Economic agents arrive, to quote Thomas Hobbes, "...as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other" (cited in Benhabib, 1992). The bearing and raising of children, and the care of the aged and sick—traditionally women's responsibilities—are, like nature, too unimportant to mention. Feminist economists have frequently pointed out this neglect by the economics discipline (Waring, 1988; Ferber and Nelson, 1993); a good recent treatment is that by Nancy Folbre (1994).

The ability of nature and the family sphere to 'take care of itself' is, of course, recently coming more and more into question. Resource depletion, pollution, questions of population and consumption, child care crises, and problems of poverty among women and children raise doubts about the wisdom of such benign neglect. While some good work has and can be done on these subjects from within the economic mainstream, such work is limited by its marginal status and also by its conceptual and methodological tools. The association of women and nature both as passive, exploitable resources is not just coincidental, or incidental to neoclassical analysis. Such thinking is part of a broader cultural way of viewing the world, with roots going far back in history.

## 3. Women and nature in western thought

"A necessary object, woman, who is needed to preserve the species or to provide food and drink."

(St. Thomas Aquinas, quoted in Plumwood, 1993, p. 19).

There is now a substantial literature in feminist philosophy on the key role played by hierarchical, dualistic thinking about human identity and gender in the creation of modern western culture and science. Carolyn Merchant's book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (Merchant, 1980) was an early, groundbreaking work examining notions of nature and gender starting in the 15th century, while Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Lloyd, 1984) went further back in history, starting with the ancient Greeks and then moving forward with Augustine and Aquinas. Further contributors and refiners of this analysis have included Evelyn Fox Keller (1985), Sandra Harding (1986), Brian Easlea (1980), Catherine Keller (1986) and Susan Bordo (1987). Val Plumwood's recent book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood, 1993) provides a good example of this analysis, and deals with recent controversies in ecology, in particular.

The central theme is that dualisms such as those in the following table have strongly influenced the western conception of the order of the world:

man	/	woman
reason	/	emotion
culture	/	nature
mind	/	body
activity	/	passivity
thought	/	matter
separate	/	connected
European	/	barbarian
human	/	animal

The distinguishing characteristic of human identity has been taken to be the intellect or consciousness that is presumed to set it apart from other creatures, or nature in general. Human identity has been based then on an emphasis on separation from, rather than connection to, nature. The category of 'human', however, refers to only the *male* of the species (and even then, only of select races, as well). Again and again, western philosophy identifies women (and slaves or 'barbarians') with nature, matter, passivity, and the body and all of these with a lower order than (dominant) men, reason, thought,

and activity. Aristotle's view of reproduction, for example, was that "while the body is from the female, it is the soul that is from the male" (C. Keller, 1985, p. 49). To Plato, "the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intellectual... and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintellectual" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 88). Plato further indicates that the soul and reason are to rule over the body and appetites, just as the Greek male is to rule over 'children and women and slaves' (Plumwood, 1993, p. 87). With the beginning of the scientific revolution, the idea of separation of body and intellect reached its apotheosis with the thought of Descartes, and his division between the *res cogitans* (thinking non-matter) and *res extensa* (nonthinking matter). To Francis Bacon, nature was something to be probed and used. "I am come in very truth", wrote Bacon, "leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave" (quoted in E. Keller, 1985, p. 39). In the period of the scientific revolution, nature became not only passive but 'dead,' and therefore mine-able and exploitable without ethical consequence (Merchant, 1980). 'Real' human life takes place in the male intellect or soul, according to this dominant western view; women and nature constitute an inferior but necessary order for the sustenance of the (rather despised) mortal, embodied self.

One interpretation sometimes drawn from such examples is that women really are 'closer to nature', and therefore are perhaps the 'natural' group to take up the ecology cause and save the planet. Such an 'earth mother' image, however, buys into the usual dualisms and stereotypes instead of challenging them.

The feminist interpreters of western philosophy named above see the central problem not as the presumed rationality of actual men (to be remedied by more emotion on the part of actual women), but deeper, in the patterns of defining male as being opposed to and superior to female, and rationality as being opposed to and superior to nature, matter, and emotion. The problem lies in the definition of human by what is seen as distinguishing humans *from* nature, rather than including what humans share *with* nature. As put by Plumwood (1993) (p. 21):

"What is involved in the backgrounding of nature is the denial of dependence on biospheric processes,

and a view of humans as apart, outside of nature, which is treated as a limitless provider without needs of its own. Dominant western culture has systematically inferiorised, backgrounded and denied dependency on the whole sphere of reproduction and subsistence.”

The images of women as natural, and of nature as female, play an important symbolic role in this intellectual view of ‘human’ identity. The image of ‘man’ as separate from nature is mediated by the image of woman as engulfed in nature, and who mediates between man and nature. Women perform the bodily care and daily provisioning that must remain unacknowledged for the masculine self-image of active autonomy to be maintained. The dependency that is denied becomes women’s invisible project.

#### 4. Beyond dualistic thinking

A number of proposed solutions to the environmental crisis stay within the traditions of western thought. Most obviously, the technocratic view accepts the ideology of human mastery over nature, and sees the problem as lying only in *insufficient* mastery. According to this view, the next scientific discovery, or an increase in economic growth (that provides for purchase of environmental protection goods) will save the day. Less obviously, philosophies of ‘holism’ or ‘cultural ecofeminism’ (I use the term to refer to the view which reinforces the identification of women with nature) also remain within the dualistic structure, in ways which will be investigated below.

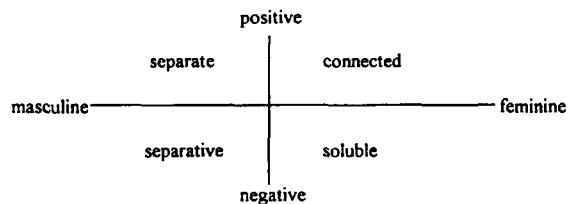
Val Plumwood (1993) and Catherine Keller (1986) present proposals about how one should work beyond these dualisms which I find convincing, and for which I have devised a diagram for illustration (Nelson, 1992). In western culture, difference from others and from nature, separation from others and from nature, or, in short, individual distinction, has been stressed as a virtue for men. It has been stressed to a point, however, that connection to, or relation to, or continuity with others and nature has been actively denied, and a myth of ability to live without social or natural support perpetuated. Keller calls this the myth of the ‘separative’ self, while Plumwood uses the term ‘hyperseparation’. On the other hand,

women have been defined by their *relation* to men (e.g., Mrs. John Jones) and to nature, to the point where a woman is believed to have no independent identity of her own. Plumwood calls this ‘merger’, while Keller calls it the ‘soluble self’. The masculine version overemphasizes the aspects that make people different from each other, and human consciousness different from other forms of consciousness or unconsciousness; the feminine version overemphasizes connection and continuity, to the exclusion of individual or distinctive will, activity, or identity.

To put these ideas in the form of an illustration, consider how the usual way of thinking about human identity, gender, and nature relies on a dualistic hierarchy where masculine gender is associated with superiority, and feminine gender with inferiority:

superior	/	inferior
masculine	/	feminine
above nature	/	part of nature

Contrast this to a picture in which cultural gender associations and value difference mark out different dimensions, where the extremes of separateness and solubility are both identified as negative extremes:



While the old, simple hierarchical dualism defines men and women, and humans and nature in opposition to each other, the new picture indicates a recognition of both separation and individuation, and connection and relation, as fundamental to human identity. Karen Warren (1987) (p. 19) writes:

“A transformative feminism would involve a psychological restructuring of our attitudes and beliefs about ourselves and ‘our world’ (including the non-human world), and a philosophical rethinking of the notion of the self such that we see ourselves as both co-members of an ecological community and yet different from other members of it.”

We are a part of nature and constituted in our relationships, as well as able to think and act as human beings and individuals. It is the lack of recognition of connection that leads to isolation, and the lack of recognition of separateness or difference that leads to engulfment.

Neither the philosophy of holism, which glorifies merger with nature, or of cultural ecofeminism, which glories in the identification of women with nature, make this break from the narrow dualism. Holism merely exchanges one side (isolation) for the other (engulfment); the 'cultural' variant of ecofeminism further adds on a gender stereotype. Jim Cheney has drawn out the implications of the broader feminist theory about separation and connection for the debate about ecological ethics in an article in *Environmental Ethics* as follows. Views of ecological ethics that remain within the simple dualisms flip from seeing the "atomistically defined self... as a sponge, absorbing the gift of the other", according to Cheney, to seeing the self as joined with the whole in 'oceanic fusion' (Cheney, 1987) (p. 124). Neither option allows 'the other' its own integrity, its own difference. The self either expands to include the other or disappears into the other.

To hark back to the words of Martin Buber's famous philosophical piece on identity and relation, *I and Thou*, one view imagines "the world... embedded in the *I* and that there is really no world at all", while the other creates an image of "the *I*... embedded in the world, and there is really no *I* at all" (Buber, 1958, p. 71–72). Both the humans-over-nature and the holistic humans-submerged-in-nature approaches reflect a failure to understand the nature of the *I and Thou* relationship, a failure of understanding how a person can be naturally and socially constituted and yet at the same time individual and distinct. Feminist thought sees the isolation/engulfment way of thinking as a particularly limited and dangerous way of regarding human identity, with harmful implications for both the relationship of humans to nature and of men to women. We are, men and women, continuous with nature-embodied and embedded, as well as conscious and active in determining our fate.

A related notion of human identity that might be more familiar to readers of this journal is that suggested by Herman Daly and James Cobb, Jr. Their

idea of the 'person-in-community', they write, "does not preclude an element of individualism" (Daly and Cobb, 1989, p. 164). Their focus on relations primarily at societal or political level, however, deflects attention away from the way in which personal relationships — and particular family relationships — form the first ground for human identity. It is quite possible to make arguments for the *social* nature of human existence while still working well within a dualism that makes *male* experience public and important, trivializes female experience, and ignores gender as a important social and cognitive force. Consider the statement of Lester Thurow (1988) that "We are individual consumers in nuclear families but we are social producers". Note that for Thurow, the social being starts at the household door, and all that is within (that is, in the traditionally female realm) is still engulfed in the notion of the 'individual'. Susan Moller Okin (1989) and others have offered detailed feminist critiques of such 'communitarian', as well as liberal perspectives in political theory. Failing to fully consider the gendered nature of the separation/connection split not only leaves one open to internal inconsistencies (such as Thurow's oxymoronic 'individual... families'), but demonstrates perhaps a certain naiveté about the historical, cognitive, and psycho-sexual breadth and depth of dualistic thinking.

## 5. The definition of economics

The list of hierarchical dualisms that underlie much of western thought can be extended to include many characteristics that define contemporary economics. Mainstream economics as a profession privileges the public (market and government) over the private (family); agents over institutions; self-interest over other-interest; autonomy over dependence; mathematical analysis over verbal analysis; abstract models over concrete studies; 'positive' over 'normative'; and efficiency over equity. It also privileges a notion of knowledge as analogous to mathematical proof over broader notions of knowledge (e.g., that include pattern recognition or *gestalts*)—what Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen called the favoring of analysis using 'arithmomorphic' concepts over analysis using 'dialectical' concepts (Georgescu-

Roegen, 1971). It is worthwhile noting that all the privileged elements are associated with being hard and rigorous; to be 'soft', of course, is to risk association with femininity.

Economists' own definition of our discipline is in marked contrast to a person-on-the-street definition of economics. There is a popular impression of economics as having to do with how things are produced and consumed, or with how one gets the money to feed one's family. One of the first tasks of an Economics 1A course, however, is to rid the student of such a practical, concrete notion and introduce them to the notions of scarcity and choice. One yanks them, in other words, from a concern with the lower-order *res extensa* to the more highly valued *res cogitans*. The agent of the neoclassical model is quite drastically disembodied and disembodied. It is not kosher, for example, to talk about 'needs' in the context of such models. Agents have only 'wants', and the economic problem is defined as the mental process (actually, not so much a process as a static optimization solution) of making rational choices when unlimited wants are frustrated by the stinginess of nature.

I read an article once in which an anorexia nervosa patient claimed that eating was a 'lifestyle habit' that she had chosen to do without. Presumably, she maximized her subjective perception of utility, having prioritized the strengths of her 'wants'. Very likely, she also died. This may be a good metaphor for the human race. As readers of this journal are likely already aware, such inattention to the bodily basis of our collective survival is dangerous.

Instead of defining economics as a study of choice, taking place above and detached from physical, emotional, and social realities, a definition of economics in terms of the study of 'provisioning' would be more in line with feminist and ecological insights. As put by Georgescu-Roegen, "Apt though we are to lose sight of the fact, the primary objective of economic activity is the self-preservation of the human species" (Georgescu-Roegen, 1966, p. 93). Such a definition is not limited to physical concepts; as Georgescu-Roegen points out that needs include those for 'purposive activity and enjoyment of life'. Amartya Sen's discussion of 'capabilities' (Sen, 1984) is also based on such a notion of a *relation-*

*ship* between human needs and the world. Within such a focus on provisioning, models of choice behavior may play a role—but it is not the central, defining one.

Going beyond the dualistic, hierarchical thinking about models and methods suggests that the current demands for adherence to formal, mathematical modelling of self-interested, autonomous choice should not be taken as simply prerequisites for great rigor, but rather as demands that masculine-biased preferences be indulged. One should not continue in dualistic thinking by assuming that the superior alternative is all on the other side (informal, qualitative, etc.), but rather one should consider an expanded notion of knowledge in which a variety of ways of knowing are considered useful (Nelson, 1992, 1996).

Consider, as one example of this notion of expanding our economic methods, the debates over the measurement of Gross Domestic Product. Some ecological economists have suggested revising measures of national production to account for resource depletion, and some feminists (e.g., Waring, 1988) stress that the value of work at home, traditionally done by women, should be included. Some studies have attempted both (Daly and Cobb, 1989). While these numbers may be useful in some ways, one should also raise questions about the importance to be given to the GDP numbers themselves. Using such a crude, single measure of production, even if refined, as a yardstick for economic welfare smacks of methodological reductionism. Multidimensional measures, that might include measures of distribution and sustainability, and measures of human outcomes such as educational attainment and health (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; UNDP, 1994) would form a more adequate basis for economic analysis and national policy-making and evaluation. Accounting for the division of labor and of goods within the household, for example, may be particularly important in evaluating human outcomes in areas where discrimination by sex and age is prevalent.

Feminist rethinking of dualistic ways of understanding the world can be useful in other parts of ecological economics, as well. Daniel A. Underwood and Paul G. King for example, in an earlier issue of this journal, argue that we need a new ethic which must involve consideration of "rights to intergenerational welfare. Thus, the motivations of homo eco-

nomicus must be changed from the 'lower ranks of feelings' to the 'higher calculus of moral right and wrong' (Underwood and King, 1989, p. 332, quotes from Jevons). Note the dualisms at play here: high/low, and calculus/feelings. Reason is still over emotion in this picture. Notice also that justice is conceived of purely in terms of rights. A great deal of recent feminist theorizing has investigated the limitations of a rights-oriented concept of justice and of the bifurcated view of reason and emotion (Benhabib, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Cheney, 1987). In much of this writing, the concept of rights is joined with a concept of responsibility in relationships: instead of looking only at the individual and his or her (or its) rights to property or autonomous action, one looks also at the network of relationships that join people with each other, with future generations, and with nature in a larger moral community, and examines the relationships of care which sustain the community.

## 6. Conclusions

This article suggests that feminist insights into western conceptions of human nature and the relation of humans to nature are vital for ecological economics. An inquiry into the strong, *gendered*, historical definition of humans as separate from nature makes social disdain for ecological economics a bit more understandable. In being ecological, it is too 'soft' and feminine to get prestige among economists (except possibly in its most mathematicized form). Of course, in being economics, it may also be too 'hard' and masculine for the holist philosophers and cultural ecofeminism advocates.

Feminist analysis suggests, however, that one can move beyond such dualist thinking. One should be able to be an economist, and have as an integral part of one's work and activity the recognition that human survival is intimately related to balance in the ecosphere. One should be able to be concerned with the environment, with care and passion, and still be unafraid of analytical thinking—and even markets!—in their proper places.

I prefer not to use the term 'eco-feminism' for such practices, for two reasons. First, while the feminist and ecology movements share intellectual

roots they are often distinct in practice. Second, to the ill-informed this label reinforces rather than challenges the association of women with nature.

Ehrlich (1989), in the first issue of this journal, notes that economics and ecology come from the same entomological root, meaning housekeeping. It is not irrelevant to intellectual discussions of ecological economics to recall who is still usually made responsible for actual housekeeping, and what amount of prestige is still accorded for such work.

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