

Beyond Real Estate, Beyond Dinner

The Anthropocentric-Ecocentric Debate

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The debate surrounding the anthropocentric v. ecocentric views of nature presents two fundamentally different ways of dealing with the environmental crisis. I will discuss these two views, as well as present feminist criticisms of both, in order to examine one of the many areas of green politics that must take into consideration the issues, ideologies and perspectives that are emerging surrounding environmental ethics. The importance of the relationship between the environment and humans has been a topic of great concern for centuries on end, but it is the dualism of humans and nature in the recent centuries, as well as the increasingly destructive consequences¹ of such a conception, that has prompted an increasing need to question the fundamental ideologies behind our political and economic freedoms in relation to the environment.

An anthropocentric view of nature refers to the relationship between humans and animals, particularly a relationship in which animals and plants are valuable only to the extent to which they can be used and exploited by humans for humans. This view sees nature as an instrument (as merely a means) instead of having any intrinsic value (an end in itself). Therefore, environmental concerns must be addressed to the interests of humans by pointing out the direct links between harm done to the environment and harm done to the human community. Further, anthropocentric views are often plagued with conceptual baggage such as individual, autonomous and even consumerist biases (Birkeland 1993). However, these ideologies do not necessarily follow from anthropocentrism, rather they are evidence of the various ways in which conceptions about our relationship to nature can combine and reinforce or alleviate oppressive relations of power.

Let us focus on these intertwining ideologies since they have now come to be seen as one and the same. The anthropocentric view on nature would suggest not only that nature is distinct² from (and an instrument for) humans, but that also that humans are individually-defined, autonomous creatures that selfishly pursue only their own needs and wants. Therefore, the suggestion is that humans too are distinct from and instrumentally used by other humans. Anthro-

¹ For analysis of how green belts, parks, etc., (paid for by corporate donors) were used to quell proletariat unrest and ill-health see (Hall 1988)

² Considering the sometimes fearful realization of interdependence (thus humanity's flee from nature by the creation of culture and science) and similarity between humans and animals, Haraway points out that "[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imagination" (Haraway 1984, 451).

pocentrism, defined as such, leaves very little room for appeals involving the environmental that require long-term, highly cooperative solutions. One of the main ways that anthropocentrism has dealt with relations between humans has been the development of the liberal-democratic process of government. Liberalism has allowed humans to posit individual self-interest (concerns) against the paradigms and beliefs of communities. This has contributed to the fall of Feudalism and the rise of Capitalism, as well as the rise of feminism. However, liberalism traditionally demands that in order to be considered as an individual with rights, one must be proven rational, autonomous and objective in the public sphere of discourse and politics (Landes 1988, Outram 1989). As Eco-Feminists will quickly point out, this route of proving one's worth according to a standard set by men (who have dominated the public sphere and politics) necessarily disregards the values and experiences of women and minorities as well as the non-human world. The personal, day-to-day experiences of subsistence living, childcare, racism, sexism, militarism, etc., fails to reach the public sphere, much less be considered experiences that reflect "reality" if those who have experienced them are themselves not considered "valid" autonomous individuals. Women and minorities have been unable³ to posit a false autonomy because their lives are continually experienced through relations and any denial of these relations goes against what has been (socially constructed) for them community and identity. Therefore, liberalism⁴ fails to see the daily needs and interconnections between the environment and our communities, and instead sees competitive (political) individuals struggling against each other as well as against the "threats" posed by the majority (the abstract, powerful community). Janis Birkeland states that:

"A liberal paradigm may be adequate for resolving social justice issues, but not preservation ones. This is because it frames all environmental issues in terms of distributed claims among competing interests in resources" (Birkeland 1993, 45).

The relationship (unfortunately they are based on commonality of oppression) between women and animals, which is an ideological as well as political one, must be used to critique existing notions of anthropo-(andro-)centric politics and instrumentalist environmentalism.

Eco-feminists suggest that the oppression of women is directly related to the oppression of animals. Reasons for this linkage varies, but often they include the anthropocentric, dualistic⁵, hierarchical and competitive values that our Western civilization holds. Androcentric views of nature is often listed as a closer definition of what is really being represented in our society. This "male-centeredness" described by eco-feminists points out the Western use of duality that places the experiences of men in the center and diminishes the opportunities for women and animals to express their needs (or have their needs expressed) in the community of ideas. The debate between anthropocentric views and ecocentric views, therefore, parallels the feminist debate over the "care ethic." In this ethic, it is suggested that traditional views of morality fails many

³ Rather than the usual Carol Gilligan-Lawrence Kohlberg debates that venture too close to essentialism, I am pointing to the political, structural reasons for difference.

⁴ see also (Holsworth1980)

⁵ "From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double-vision or many-headed monsters"(Harraway 1984, 429).

areas (in fact the majority) of society by positing a linear, autonomous, rights-based morality that depends upon access to a public sphere of discourse that no longer exists. This non-existent public sphere involves moral agents who are supposedly entirely in the world of rational thought (devoid of [actually hide their] emotional, personal impulses) and because they are “rational” beings are given a valid access to the public sphere of discourse. Their needs and wants are disguised thoroughly in the language of the generalized⁶ Other and meant to help the community as a whole, indeed this is the whole purpose of this public discourse. The competition of the ideas themselves are to be the only criteria for choosing or enacting one over the other. Therefore, there is the suggestion that in this public sphere all are equal and all have the same rights, including the right to have their ideas (opinions) heard and respected.

What feminists have pointed out is that there is a whole other side to this in that not everyone and everything is given a voice that is validated by the public sphere, and therefore given no access to guaranteed rights. Feminists see women, minorities and the non-human world as being on the receiving end of public decisions without being able to represent themselves in the decision-making process. Laws concerning morals, regulations on businesses, social programs, etc., all affect these communities and yet their input is stifled by the process of representative, liberal-democratic government (Lonzi 1977). Appeals to rights is denied by a process that regards only “rational” autonomous (male) individuals, who can properly represent themselves, as being a valid member of the moral community. While rights have had this legacy, animal liberationists have not completely by-passed them. Tom Regan and Peter Singer have attempted to bring non-human animals into the sphere of moral community by using the tradition of rights-based morality and utilitarianism. Regan suggests that all “subjects-of-a-life,” which non-human animals are designated to be, have an inherent value that is protected by rights. Peter Singer places the non-human community up for equal consideration in which “all like interests are counted, regardless of the skin color, sex or species of the interest-holder.” This presents situations in which scientific research can be performed on animals only if a human could be “equally considered” for the position of test subject. If the situation is important enough to sacrifice on human life then an animal may be used. However, it is not clear why the human subject would not be used instead of the animal, except for that there is still a fundamental difference or deciding factor (dare I say anthropocentrism?) that would still be considered valid, even universally valid in the human community. Another problem with Peter Singer’s position thesis is that he places only non-human animals in the realm of equal consideration. The reason for this is because he sees on those beings that can experience pain as being worthy of protection. He states that “a stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer” (Singer 1990, 341). This mode of reasoning can easily discount flora unless appeals to the suffering of animals via destruction of their habitat can be proven and equally considered. Singer’s utilitarianism also concerns eco-feminist’s sense of morality. Utilitarianism, especially Singer’s brand, implies that individuals are equal and equally replaceable. This notion does not gel with either feminist “care ethics” or with real-life situations. Zygmunt Bauman claims that rather than being some mathematical formula that calculates the hedons of some abstracted inter-relationship, what is needed is a morality in which “neither I nor the Other in this party is replaceable. It is precisely this irreplaceability [including humans and nature] which makes our togetherness moral, and the morality of our togetherness self-sustained

⁶ For information on how legal rules encode the female body with meanings and the way the neutrality conceals the construction of those meanings see (Frug 1992).

and self-sufficient, needing no rules of law” (Bauman 1993, 112). This moral theory fits well with the feminist and ecocentric views of personal (yet rational), anarchic (yet freely ordered) community.

Aldo Leopold’s land ethic is often given as a corrective means of dealing with anthropocentric views of nature and rights-based animal liberation theories. The land, which is a part of the biotic community, is considered to have an intrinsic value that has inalienable rights. Usual examples for pointing out this intrinsic value include scenarios in which one is a fighter pilot flying over a distant (and falsely considered autonomous) island that is not inhabited by humans and will never be reached by humans for purposes of research. You, the pilot, must quickly drop the cargo of bombs in order to save the plane from crashing. The question posed is whether there is any reason to avoid dropping the bombs on the island and instead drop them into the sea. Aside from the fact that if one were a fighter pilot, land, not to mention human life, would be (and has been) irrelevant, rational appeals concerning the effects upon distant creatures is discounted. The scenario is not allowed to take into context the interconnectedness of the environment. Further, there is the suggestion that there is a difference between dropping bombs on land and dropping them in the sea, as if there is nothing living in the sea that can be harmed.

Another example concerns the “last man” scenario in which you are the last human being on earth and you have access to nuclear weaponry that can destroy the world. You are therefore asked why or why not you would blow up planet Earth. More bizarre than the last question, it suggests that blowing up the earth is even something that one would consider! Why would one’s last thought be destructive? These examples, however odd they may be, are suppose to bring up reasons (beyond Reason) that support the intrinsic value that we have given to the land. This intrinsic value is a very important part of an ecocentric view of nature, however intrinsic value can be defined in the context that everything has instrumental value for everything (or something) else and thus is equally valuable not merely as a means but also as an end.

An ecocentric view of nature, however, could suggest that all things, including diseases, are equal. This result does not necessarily follow though if one takes into account that equal consideration is virtually impossible. The reasons are simply that not all animals, lands, rivers, people are interchangeable⁷ and thus equally valued. This goes directly against the traditional view of morality, but it is a reality that must be recognized in order to avoid falling into false objectivity. Some animals are pets, some humans are mothers, fathers, and children and some lands are home. To suggest that one could avoid valuing face-to-face relations over distant or abstract relations is to hide a part of our moral consideration, indeed to propose an altogether questionable, and possibly frightening, morality. It is this very abstraction, disguised as holism, that has been considered to be one of the reasons that we have continued to see humans and nature as dualistically opposed to each other. As Lori Gruen suggests:

“by devaluing subjective experience, reducing living, spontaneous beings to machines to be studied, and establishing an epistemic privilege based on detached reason, the mechanistic/scientific mindset firmly distinguished man from nature, woman, and animals” (Gruen 1993, 64).

⁷ “The point of a contextualist ethic is that one need not treat all interests equally as if one had no relationship to any of the parties” (Curtin 1991, 75).

This distinction reinforces the oppressive power of an anthropo-(andro-)centric view of nature. It destroys the direct connection, the lived experience between humans and nature (as well as humans and humans), that is fundamental to a(n) (eco-)feminist ethic and an ecocentric view of nature.

The Liberal agenda of rights, autonomy and objective public discourse seems to fail in many ways with respect to the environment. How does the environment represent itself? How can others represent it in the public sphere and what happens when contractual compromise, which is a major part of liberalism, comes into play? Compromise such as regulating pollution, clear-cutting, etc., is seen by deep ecologists as highly problematic not only because harm is still being inflicted upon the environment (of which we are a part), but also because the system has incorporated (justified through regulation) environmental destruction without ever questioning the process and necessity of harming the environment, as well as avoiding directly questioning the System. Our Western obsession⁸ with growth and continual economic/material “progress” has gone against notions of sustainability that is found to be a basic demand in “third-world” nations. In these areas of the world, a land ethic has developed from personal experience between humans and nature. The destruction of the land immediately impacts the inhabitants who are dependent upon it for firewood, water, food, building supplies, etc. Further, it is women (especially once industrialization has separated the lives of men and women) who perform many of the daily tasks of food preparation, child-rearing, etc., that the destruction of the environment is directly related to the oppression of women. This is the main reason that eco-feminists link the liberation of women with the liberation of nature and that only through an ecocentric vision can these connections be made. Indeed, only through an ecocentric vision (they would claim) can we avoid the dangers of essentialism and reification of our present oppressive system.⁹ The avoidance, they suggest, is due to the eco-feminist questioning of power systems. Although I see their claims as being more of an anarcho-feminist¹⁰ critique of power systems, their incorporation of this theory is helpful in understanding an ecocentric view of nature.

Eco-feminists suggest that because of our specifically Western anthropo-(andro-)centric theories, humans are seen as fundamentally autonomous and competitive individuals in a struggle for power. This struggle, therefore, necessitates¹¹ (justifies) a legal system based on contracts, an international system of competing nation-states, and a series of hierarchy throughout the public and private spheres. As I mentioned before, there are many problems that arise when dealing with the environmental crises in a world of liberalism, compromise and instrumentalism. In addition, there is the problem that is associated with completion and nation-states. If the international sphere is seen as a competitive, anarchic battleground, then appeals for commonality and cooperation are difficult. Christine Sylvester states that:

⁸ “What is pursued in other words are not ends, but the capacity to pursue ends. This is identical with the pursuit of power, not as a means, but as an end in itself” (Poole 1985, 48)

⁹ Further, “the psychological effect of understanding the earth as a fundamentally feminine parent is to reduce our sense of the vast and varied subjectivities of the planet and all its life to our projections of human consciousness and to blur the diversified forms of the natural world with our associations to human bodies or even the particular human body of our own mother” (Lahar 1991, 11).

¹⁰ For a discussion of recent anarchist critiques of power systems see (May 1994).

¹¹ “If Mankind is by nature autonomous, aggressive, and competitive...then psychological coercion or hierarchical structures are necessary to manage conflict and maintain social order” (Birkeland 1993, 25).

“Anarchy would be one of those great lies and bizarre beliefs that denies ‘the interconnectedness of things,’ that prevents us from ‘seeing through The Whole Thing.’ Its sign frightens and immobilizes us into thinking that an absence of male-led governance on the international level makes it imperative to accept the protections of men at home, ‘even though in doing so ‘women’ are mocked in our cultures for being so vulnerable. Anarchy, in this understanding, would be part of a ‘protection racket,’ all the pieces of which work to obscure our locations and choices and the extent to which the protectors escape accountability by perpetuating the lie that the unitary state is comprised of equal parties to a contract” (Sylvester 1994, 113).

It is this assumption of competition that forces dualistic formulas of them and us, humans and nature. From this, one wonders how does one could protect the global environment through nation-states that have different, competing interests? What eco-feminists would remind us of is that the interconnection of humans and nature also suggests the interconnection of humans and humans (Meehan 1995). Even in a world of liberalism, appeals to individual self-interest can provide space for environmental concerns if it is pointed out how environmental destruction in one part of the world effects the environment (and its inhabitants) in another part of the world. I would also point out that self-interest is not (and cannot be) separate from an ecocentric view of nature. Self-interest is what has motivated much of the debate thus far, including those ideologies in the “third-world.” Eco-feminists would even argue that an co-centric conception of the world does not necessarily mean that a system is not oppressive. Huey-li Li states that:

“women’s oppression occurred long before the machine became the predominant metaphor for reality. Chinese misogyny, in particular, coexisted with an organic world view...The development of individualism within the mechanistic world model produced social changes that may have contributed to the contemporary feminist movement” (Li 1990).

Indeed, only by questioning the relations of power and hierarchy in conjunction with an ecocentric view of nature can oppression and duality be destroyed. This task includes the power that “first-world” nations exercise over “third-world” nations, the power that humans exercise over animals, as well as the power that “ism’s” have over the minds and bodies of human communities. The ability to question our oppressive forms of power must come from (and, I believe, can only come from) an anthropocentric and ecocentric view of nature. By this, I mean to suggest that rationality, discursive and structural analysis of power, and sociopolitical revamping of our economic and ideological relations (with respect to the the nation-state, the family, Liberalism, and Capitalism), must be appealed to as well as the localized, experiential realities of those who in the past have been denied access (and validation of their claims for equal rights, equal access) to the very powers of decision-making that directly impact their lives every day. An ecocentric morality can only be pursued from within the confines of our self-interested wants and needs, and to deny this self-interestedness is to allow oppressive power relations to gain silent footholds in our relationships with other humans as well as with nature. Therefore, morality must pursue a course of “care” that extends local “face-to-face” relationships between humans and nature to the general concern for the planet. This concern would involve the realization that nature has an intrinsic as well as instrumental value in that we need a healthy planet in order to survive

because we are equally doomed to destruction because we are interwoven in this idea of Nature. In conclusion, the anthropocentric/ecocentric debate synthesizes through the realization that the two are already interconnected and that human agency with respect to environmental issues can sometimes be a good thing.

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