

# ON ECOFEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

CHRIS CUOMO

In the heat of a historical moment when the interwoven nature of imperialism, ecological degradation, exploitation of workers, racism, and women's oppression is painfully obvious to many, ecofeminism appears to be gaining in popularity. As Karen Warren's book *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) illustrates, a key insight of ecological feminism is captured by the phrase "it's all connected." In more precise terms, ecofeminism stresses the depth to which human realities are embedded in ecological realities, and the fact that we are all composed of physical and conceptual connections and relationships. Ecofeminists also make strong normative claims about those connections, and they find present ecological and social relationships to be far more morally troubling than "we" modern thinkers tend to acknowledge.

Karen Warren's work has been incredibly influential in the development of ecofeminism, especially as a philosophical perspective. In her 1987 essay "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," she argued for a basic ecofeminist position: that feminists ought to pay attention to environmental issues and ecological interdependencies, and that environmentalists ought to attend to the connections among ecological degradation, sexism, and other forms of social oppression. A wealth of ecofeminist poetry, fiction, and political writing had been published in the seventies and early eighties, before "Feminism and Ecology" appeared on the pages of

the journal *Environmental Ethics*. But Karen Warren was the among the first to use the tools of analytic philosophy to articulate and argue for ecofeminism as a philosophical position, ethical approach, and political movement.

In fact, Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) was arguably the first work in contemporary academic philosophy to engage ecofeminism (my first acquaintance with ecofeminist theory was made through a special issue of the feminist magazine *Heresies*, on feminism and ecology). But Daly's emphasis was on the plight of females in patriarchal social environments. Karen Warren and Australian philosopher Val Plumwood brought full focus to the *eco* in ecofeminism, applying feminist philosophy (and especially feminist ethics) to our relations with the more than human world, and in turn articulating a broader theory of oppression and liberation. Their analytic approaches resulted in philosophy that synthesizes as it clarifies, taking seriously the value of nature, the history of philosophy, the power of culture, and the insights of good science.

In *Ecofeminist Philosophy* Karen Warren presents ecofeminism as a general school of thought, though she also argues for a particular set of ecofeminist principles, values, methodologies, and practices. In terms of both her method and her conclusions, it is important to note that her emphasis on clearly articulated principles is by no means a defense of an absolutist or falsely universalizing ethic. Rather, Warren's ecofeminist philosophy emerges from her reading of a wide and diverse array of theoretical and political examples. Like Noël Sturgeon's *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (1997), which focuses on feminist ecological movements, Warren's project is to look for and describe the family resemblances among diverse examples of ecofeminism. This approach allows her to articulate epistemic, moral, and political positions that are pluralist, yet do not avoid making bold truth-claims. For example, Warren argues that "something is a feminist issue if an understanding of it helps one understand the oppression, subordination, or domination of women" (Warren 2000, 1).

In a sense such a definition is wide open, taking various approaches and issues to be worthy of feminist attention. At the same time, it certainly does not allow just any perspective to count as feminist. Throughout *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Warren defends multicultural ethics while clearly advocating specific transcultural values, such as justice and caring:

If we dare to care, if we dare to enter into community with others through an honest recognition of our commonalities and differences, we will be poised to create generally respectful, nonviolent, care-based, intentional communities where commonalities and differences are just that . . . Such intentional communities are a creative alternative to violence-prone communities where order is imposed from outside through unjustified domination. (204)

Warren uses a variety of metaphors, including a fruit bowl, a Venn diagram, and a web, to illustrate her conception of ecofeminism. To convey what it means for a theory to be both deeply pluralist and multicultural, yet committed to certain core values, Warren describes ecofeminism as like a quilt: “An ecofeminist philosophical quilt will be made up of different ‘patches,’ constructed by quilters in particular social, historical, and materialist contexts” (66). As the borders of a quilt allow for an infinite range of internal designs, ecofeminism’s boundary conditions (i.e., opposing social and ecological domination, encouraging justice in all spheres, rethinking ontology), allow for a wide range of emphases and methodologies.

I must admit that I am not aesthetically drawn to the metaphors Warren chooses. In making sense of what it means to combine the insights of feminism and ecology, I have been more drawn to metaphors that explicitly question traditional norms of femininity, such as Haraway’s cyborg, or my own caricature, “Sisterwomanchainsaw.” Nonetheless, the cultural magnetism of stereotypically feminine imagery can be politically useful, even for feminists. Discussions of cyborgs, which are interesting and useful precisely because they are so open to interpretation, can help us understand the dynamics of interimbrication, and the relationships between conflicting discourses and complex identities. But the quilt is a far more universally understood and relatively transparent metaphor. Its simplicity lends itself to the kind of analytic clarity Warren seeks in presenting a defensible definition of ecofeminism. It may therefore prove quite useful in conveying the logic of ecofeminist theorizing.

Warren’s accurate and persuasive presentation of the whole ecofeminist quilt, with her careful explanations and arguments, provides a definitive introduction to ecofeminism, especially as it stood at the turn of the century. Not every reader will be interested in following her every thread of exposition and justificatory logic, but the book’s structure facilitates selective reading, and its unique contributions make the wade through sometimes overly-careful argument worth the effort. I imagine the text will be

an incredibly useful course textbook. Given how much ground it covers concerning the ethics of ecology, the basics of gender and race, and the intersections between the ecological and the social, it will serve as an excellent foundation for any course on ecofeminism, or any advanced course in environmental ethics.

But what about Warren's own patch in the quilt—*her* ecofeminist philosophy? In presenting certain aspects of ecofeminism as central or crucial (a technique that cannot be avoided by anyone who sets out to explain or define), Karen Warren presents her own version of ecofeminism—a practical philosophy that she hopes will inspire and enable real moral and social change. Looking at her particular spin on ecofeminism—her view of what it is (what ecofeminists say), and what it ought to be (the “boundary conditions” of ecofeminism)—might tell us quite a lot about where the power and promise of ecofeminism is currently found.

I take that phrase “power and promise,” an unusually optimistic measure for anything in the contemporary discipline of philosophy, from the title of Karen Warren's widely-read and often reprinted 1991 essay, “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism.” That essay includes an argument that is basic to Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, and that is commonly characterized as the fundamental insight of ecofeminism. The view argued for is that a “logic of domination” that divides the world into bifurcated hierarchies is basic to all forms of oppression and domination. This logic (which Warren also calls a “conceptual framework”) is a way of thinking that encourages separating from and mistreating nature and members of subordinated groups, for no good reason. In addition, the conceptual frameworks that are used to justify racism, sexism, and the mistreatment of nature (etc.), are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

Some ecofeminists find that the very aspects of identity and otherness (gender, race, class, species, etc.) are *created* through conceptual frameworks that encourage domination rather than connection, but Warren remains agnostic about such ontological issues. Her emphasis instead is on a more basic point—that the morally loaded concepts through which we understand ourselves and reality (and through which “we” humans have historically constructed knowledge) are at the core of the terrible ecological and social messes we currently face.

Because she takes the argument about the logic of domination to be basic, Warren sometimes characterizes ecofeminism as primarily a *critical* project—a set of perspectives that aim to understand and dismantle the

web of domination and oppression. Her empirical argument for ecofeminism (found in the book's first chapter, "Nature is a Feminist Issue") describes not the ecological interdependence of all beings, but the material enmeshment of different forms of oppression and domination. Concerning issues such as land and water rights, forestry, and toxic dumping, women, the poor, and members of other subjugated groups suffer disproportionately from ecological damage. And even when the oppressed are not its worst victims, environmental malfeasance is a product of masculinist, colonial, and capitalist assumptions and practices. Given this critique it may seem obvious that the heart of ecofeminism is the drive to eliminate all forms of domination. In Warren's own words,

The boundary conditions specify that an ecofeminist ethic must be anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-naturist, and opposed to any 'ism' that presupposes or advances a logic of domination; (99)

and

The basic starting point of ecofeminist philosophy is that the dominations of women, other human Others, and nonhuman nature are interconnected, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated. (155)

Because it developed in relation to a history of ethics that it rejects as inadequate, work in environmental ethics nearly always begins with a foundational statement about something it takes to be "the problem." For example, classic work in the field argues that human chauvinism, speciesism, or anthropocentrism are moral failures, and that they are to blame for current ecological crises. Although ecofeminist philosophy departs from the mold by stressing the complexity of "the problem," it tends also to begin with a critique of the status quo, and to move only from there to a discussion of positive alternatives. Reading *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (and the quotes above) one might understandably get the sense that ecofeminism is a theory mostly about domination and oppression, and that therefore its contribution to environmental ethics is its characterization of "the problem."

Talk of a logic of domination is a way of identifying the values embedded in culture's unjust hierarchies, and mapping the effects of such hierarchies, and such logics, is a crucial project for moral philosophy. Ecofeminists have shown that this is true because different forms of exploitation and domination are connected conceptually, but also because gender, race, class, and "nature" come together in reality—in identities, economies, so-

cial institutions, and practices. Analyses of complex and interwoven systems of domination are therefore key to understanding social truths, and nearly any interface of nature and culture. Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy* shows that the clear and persuasive presentation of such analyses was one of the primary projects of twentieth-century ecofeminist philosophy. This project was political as well as philosophical, for to identify the hidden lines of influence and power that shape patterns of injustice and impairment is to point toward strategies for ethical engagement and improvement.

Nonetheless, although they can point in more creative directions, what is most interesting to theories of oppression are the particulars of oppression. Any theory of oppression includes (at least) a latent theory of what oppression is *not*, but efforts to carefully delineate "the problem" do not always include attention to the existence of alternative possibilities, or alternative realities. A critical theory's intense focus on oppression can sometimes be as debilitating as it is illuminating, because it can make the world seem like an unmitigated disaster. Perhaps this is why theories of oppression tend toward absolutism (such as the view that all property is theft), psychological pessimism (such as the view that we are driven toward death), and gloomy descriptions of moral life (such as the view that a world deeply influenced by interwoven systems of domination is a world in which widescale moral improvement is virtually impossible).

Thankfully, like any theory, theories of oppression are always partial descriptions of what they attempt to describe. Feminists and other social critics know how important it is to remember that simple fact, because when our attention is focused on the force of dominating violence, it can be difficult to notice compassion, fairness, and beauty, or to identify the absence of violence.

Despite what it adds to our understanding of domination, it is a mistake to take the heart of ecofeminism to be its theory of oppression. Although I cannot make the case here, I would venture that the combination of the "eco" and the "feminist" ultimately prevents it from becoming another reductionist theory of oppression. Ecofeminism begins with awareness of the beauty (or "moral value") of the natural world, and the human tendency toward compassion and caring. From this awareness, ecofeminism aims not only to understand and criticize oppressive divisions, but also to revive, craft, and draw attention to alternatives. The real power and promise of ecofeminism therefore lies not in its critique, but in what it discloses

about the possibilities within, beneath, and beyond domination. As Warren herself writes:

An ecofeminist ethic provides a central place for values typically unnoticed, underplayed, or misrepresented in traditional ethics (e.g., values of care, love, friendship, and appropriate trust). These are values that presuppose that our relationships to others are central to an understanding of who we are; (100)

and

Minimally, the goal of ecofeminist environmental ethics is to develop theories and practices concerning humans and the natural environment that are not male-biased and that provide a guide to action in the prefeminist present. (37)

If this is really Warren's view, why the tendency to define ecofeminism primarily in terms of its theory of oppression, and to describe the connections that ecofeminism is so interested in as connections between different forms of domination, rather than the connections (ecological and ethical) among living systems and beings? I believe the answer can be found in a consideration of ecofeminism's place in the academy, especially in relation to feminist theory, on one hand, and environmental ethics, on the other.

Ecofeminism was originally associated with the view that women and nature are connected in morally significant ways because both are identified with femininity (or traits labeled "feminine"). This femininity, associated with characteristics ranging from fecundity to vulnerability to wildness, was seen as a source of ecological and social flourishing that is violently degraded in patriarchal cultures. Ecofeminists therefore took women and nature to be connected because, as providers of life, sustenance, and creativity, they are similarly important and valuable, and their strengths are similarly controlled or violated by men (or "patriarchy"). In addition, common metaphors, practices, and institutions encourage and justify their abuse.

As an ethico-political response to this "dual oppression," ecofeminists advocated turning toward nature and reclaiming the connection, to protect the interests of the natural world, and to empower women physically, spiritually, and economically. In the 1970s we therefore saw ecofeminism expressed in transnational feminist anti-militarism and back-to-the-land movements. But by the mid-eighties, ecofeminism was widely characterized as "essentialist," or falsely universalizing, and theoretical explorations of connections between women and nature were rightly criticized for

lacking adequate attention to racial and cultural difference. In addition, ecofeminist reclamations of femininity were criticized as glorifications of femaleness that were retrograde in relation to traditional norms of sex and gender. Some feminist critics of ecofeminism took the fact that “woman” is a constructed category to indicate that woman-nature connections are ultimately only cultural and symbolic. Others argued that most women do not experience unique or particular closeness to nature, and that the very idea of women-nature connections suggests a limiting conception of femininity and a false sense of female superiority.

The early ecofeminist emphasis on positive connections between women and nature was bound to be revised, because any view that equates female bodies with goodness, however loosely or conceptually, is easily shown to be false. This is because no evaluative claim is universally true of female bodies, or any bodies that express individual will. So claims about unique connections between women and nature are easily dismissed as falsely universalizing. On the other hand, a claim like “sexism, racism, and the degradation of the natural world are connected” points to material effects and conditions, and does not make universalizing claims about a group or persons. As Karen Warren shows in the first chapter of *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, the claim “sexism, racism, and the degradation of the natural world are connected” can even be proven empirically.

My point here is that one reason for Warren’s description of a theory of oppression as the heart of ecofeminism is the fact that theories of oppression, or critical theories, are more verifiable, and run less risk of essentialist readings than positive theories of moral possibility risk. In addition, I believe the tendency to focus on the critical project is also attributable to the force of anti-feminist sentiment within the field of environmental ethics.

As in most male-dominated fields, feminists in philosophy are repeatedly called upon to prove the reality of sexism, and to state their basic points over and over again. When so much energy apparently must be put toward arguing for the basic legitimacy of feminism and feminist methodologies, there is less energy available for the positive projects of feminist philosophy. For example, when Karen Warren decides to defend ecofeminism against J. Baird Callicott’s unfortunate claim that “ecofeminism eschews ethical theory” (118–19), her argument looks defensive and unnecessary, because she seems to be making such a basic and obvious point. It is clear that she does not engage Callicott’s critique because it enriches her own



theory, but because it sets the record straight regarding the philosophical sophistication of ecofeminist ethics.

How much philosophical effort should we spend setting the record straight, in the context of academic philosophy? For many feminist philosophers, that is not an easy question to answer. But what if we can *never* set the record straight, because foundational challenges (i.e., “feminist philosophy is not philosophy”) are not epistemically grounded, but politically and psychologically motivated?

Happily, Karen Warren depicts an ecofeminism that is about strategies and solutions as well as precise descriptions of problems. This ecofeminism includes sophisticated analyses of gender, race, and colonialism, and it is fundamentally linked to struggles for global justice and ecological flourishing. Perhaps because the grounding assumptions of ecofeminism resonate so deeply with women’s and community struggles around the world, including movements against oppressive globalization, ecofeminism (by any name) seems to have survived the anti-essentialist panic, and to have evolved into a more rigorous, multicultural, and useful perspective. Although Warren’s analytic approach sometimes leads her to emphasize the aspects of ecofeminism that are about understanding oppression, subordination, and domination, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* is a work that does not take the logic of domination to be totalizing. Instead, it makes significant contributions to the development of philosophical positions and political practices that are realistic and available alternatives to dominating frameworks and damaging forms of being: A positive philosophy of complexity and connection.

For example, Warren’s ecofeminism takes the subjects and objects of knowledge to be relational and multidimensional, and emphasizes how physical and social interdependencies effect existence on all layers, from the physical and chemical to the global economic. Recognizing social complexity, ecofeminism takes objects of curiosity, study, and understanding to be multifaceted, and embedded in arrays of interdependencies. Ecofeminism sees the components of reality as constituted and defined through relationships. It sees meaning as relational, and history as shaped in myriad ways, in part by chance and unknowns.

Ecofeminists emphasize the limits of any knowledge, and the fact that even a bird’s eye- or first-person view is partial. Yet it does not follow that there is nothing we can know, or that knowledge is not central to ethical existence. Because ecofeminism aims to uncover and respond to a wide

range of complex social, ecological, and eco-social truths, it is necessarily a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary endeavor, requiring effective methods for interdisciplinary exchange.

When we take ecofeminism to be primarily a theory of oppression, we neglect its usefulness as a positive and creative philosophy that can teach us about existing and available *alternatives* to oppression. The projects of ecofeminist theory are nothing less than describing and probing (from a wide variety of perspectives) the categories and practices that maintain forms of identity and forms of human life (gender, race, clan, and species, economy, culture, and sexuality), and investigating how these are deeply interwoven with each other, and with an even more complex (and beautiful and endangered) natural world.

I find most inspiring in *Ecofeminist Philosophy* Warren's attempts to sit in and describe this complexity, and to uncover positive potential in realities where oppressive power threatens to overwhelm. For example, as readers who have not been paying attention to feminist epistemology and philosophy of science may be surprised to see, Warren characterizes ecofeminism as *based in science* that aims for understanding and ecological flourishing, rather than domination. In turn, ecofeminism makes unique contributions to science:

One contribution ecofeminist philosophy can make is its understanding of the roles played by socially constructed values in the practice and theory of science . . . Ecofeminist philosophy can also contribute to the theory and practice of science by revealing how power and privilege function in the social construction of scientific knowledge, for example, by reinforcing faulty notions of science as value-neutral and by portraying "the object" of knowledge (nature) as passive and inert. (158–9)

Ecofeminism also draws from non-"scientific" forms of knowledge, not because those forms of knowledge have been historically devalued, or because it is fair to implement some sort of affirmative action policy regarding epistemology, but because that knowledge is illuminating and useful. For example, some indigenous cultures provide specifically useful models of ecologically sustainable cultures, and systems of values and metaphysics that promote ecological flourishing, rather than degradation. Karen Warren draws on one such model to develop a justification for "contextual moral vegetarianism," citing Native American and Inuit practices in which using animals for food is part of a moral weave that includes fundamental moral regard for nature and nonhuman animals. She writes,

Cultural contexts may provide the most compelling sort of reasons against universal moral vegetarianism. Few, if any, primal cultures are vegetarian, even though many of them really believe that nonhuman nature is active, alive, enspirited, capable of willing, acting, and knowing. This is particularly interesting philosophically because, while such primal cultures seem to share a similar starting point as animal welfarism—a deeply held belief in nonhuman animals as subjects—they reach radically different conclusions than animal welfarists. (134)

Attention to respectful indigenous uses of meat allows us to ask key philosophical questions, such as *Is the moral problem of using animals simply about causing pain and death?* and *To what extent are the moral problems with meat eating a matter of values and forms of life, rather than absolute principles?* Warren draws on indigenous sources of knowledge not simply because she holds a theory of oppression (because they are historically oppressed or underrepresented), but because they offer unique and vital wisdom concerning human-animal connection and communication.

A final place where it becomes clear that Warren's view of ecofeminism is much broader than an analysis of a ubiquitous "logic of domination" is her discussion of spirituality. Like ecofeminist theory, ecofeminist spirituality begins with ecological and social connection, and its expression of ethical insight enacts the ecofeminist critique of hyper-rationality. In creating a space for serious philosophical engagement with feminist spirituality, Karen Warren makes clear that the ontological connections *experienced* by earth-loving folks (and described by ecology) do provide persuasive foundations for ethics that are life-affirming, realistic, and transformative.

By valuing women, people, and the nonhuman world, asserting an expansive conception of knowledge that embraces good science along with the knowledge that emerges from experience, culture, and creativity, and articulating metaphysics of connection and uncertainty, ecofeminism is far more than just a critique of domination. It is the knowledge we need here and now.