

Karen J. Warren. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. viii, 253 pages.

For over a decade, Minnesota-based academic Karen Warren has contributed to ecofeminism with journal articles and edited anthologies. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* is her first single-authored book. It arrives after several prolific years in ecofeminist publishing from historically oriented thinkers such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Ariel Salleh, and Mary Mellor to postmodernists such as Noel Sturgeon and Catriona Sandilands. Warren's approach, like Val Plumwood's before her, derives from the tradition of analytic philosophy and its strength lies in energetic argumentation.<sup>1</sup> What is less clear is how the ecofeminist voice behind the text is constituted—in a word, the grounding of Warren's ecofeminist philosophy.

The book opens with a mass of valuable information on women and forests, water, farming, pollution, and health, justifying the link between gender and ecology in an empirical sense. In an introductory theoretical chapter "What are Ecofeminists Saying?" Warren goes on to list ten varieties of ecofeminist explanation, but her chosen typological categories are mutually contaminating. For example, if ecofeminist approaches are all intended to be explanatory, then many will also be "causal." Many "historical" theories will also be "empirical" and "socioeconomic." Every variety of explanation will involve "conceptual, linguistic, and symbolic" tools. And given that ecofeminist explanation is always about sex/gender power relations, then every ecofeminist standpoint will be "political." Another problem with the taxonomic treatment of texts is that efforts to pigeonhole theorists can lead to a reductionist misrepresentation of positions. Consider Shiva's ecofeminism, which builds ecological, historical, political, epistemological, and spiritual connections; or Salleh's embodied materialism, which uses a model of overdetermination. Warren misses these interlocking structural relationships and locates the latter under explanations based on "personality formation and consciousness" (p. 24). Certainly meaning and agency will play a part, but Warren takes part for whole.

Some of Warren's difficulty with exposition here may be due to a lack of orientation in the history of ideas. While her work focuses on clarification of arguments in ecofeminism, it shows little familiarity with European continental philosophy and currents that have shaped twentieth-century Western thought, such as psychoanalysis, phenomenology, Marxism, or deconstruction. The book

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993); Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics* (New York: St Martins, 1997); Mary Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997); Noel Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Catriona Sandilands, *The Good Natured Feminist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

*Ecofeminist Philosophy* is very much about dismantling “oppressive conceptual frameworks,” but Derrida is not in the reference list. Likewise, Warren’s feminist sources are mainly U.S. ones, bypassing international debates among socialist women and the influential literature of French feminist theory.

The European tradition shares common antecedents with sociology, however, and since feminism is about sex-skewed social relations and the social construction of gendered knowledges, a critical sociology is invaluable to ecofeminist reasoning. Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy, on the other hand, is primarily engaged with the manipulation and assessment of propositions. It is not designed to deal with questions of power. Moreover, the deductive mechanism suppresses reflexive scrutiny of the connection between philosopher and thought process. Thus, Warren describes her ecofeminism as arising from three spheres: (a) feminism, (b) nature, science, development, and technology, and (c) local and indigenous perspectives. But she does not explain how these conceptual circles are interrelated in social life; nor how they have come to shape her own thought. In the chapter “Quilting Ecofeminist Philosophy,” she adopts the cybernetic vocabulary of management, characterizing her three key areas of concern as “overlapping factors that are important as input and solution” (p. 44). In the absence of historical context, a topological model emerges by default, with feminism, ecology, and philosophy externalized and neutralized on a flat propositional plane.

In addressing power, Warren identifies five common features of an “oppressive conceptual framework” — value hierarchical thinking, oppositional value dualisms, power over others, privilege, and a logic of domination (pp. 46–47). To quote: “benefits are institutionally created, maintained, and sanctioned; they reflect the power and privilege of Ups in unjustified Up-Down systems. And such Up-Down systems create, maintain, or perpetuate unjustified ‘isms of domination’ such as sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, and colonialism” (p. 65). Given that sociological power is by definition a force over others, the discussion of up and down is somewhat tautological. What is needed is information on how gender and race, etc. are each dynamic components of a global political economy driven by material accumulation flows from South to North and East to West. Nevertheless, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* offers an interesting summary of distributive justice theory, noting that its amenability to cost-benefit analysis may well account for its popularity. Warren endorses Iris Marion Young’s view that distributive justice arguments inevitably place too much focus on objects, so that they handle questions like labor, cultural integrity, or individuality, in a static way.<sup>2</sup> She rightly concludes that justice is not well served by distributive processes that remain lodged inside corrupted institutional contexts.

The book *Ecofeminist Philosophy* does not address power relations within ecofeminism as a movement, but Warren does say that for her, “quilting” is

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<sup>2</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press: 1990).

about “advancing positions, advocating strategies, and recommending solutions. This prescriptive aspect of ecofeminist philosophy is central to *doing* philosophy” (p. 43). At other times, she uses the quilt metaphor more conventionally to describe a patchwork plurality of voices, where each adds something to ecofeminist understanding as a whole. Again, Warren generously acknowledges that theory is “always *in-process*,” but then returns to a normative and exclusionary notion of quilting as delimiting the “boundary conditions” of a theory (p. 66). Grassroots and spiritual ecofeminisms are named “pre-philosophical,” implying a hierarchy of positions. Warren draws a fence line between common garden variety ecofeminism versus ecological feminist philosophy by remarking that the latter steers clear of theoretical “mistakes.” “It is an important project of ecofeminist philosophy to determine which ecofeminist positions presuppose biological determinism, conceptual essentialism, or universalism, and which do not” (p. 54). In response to Warren’s censorship, though, it can be argued that if women are oppressed by an ideology of nature, then investigation of all lived aspects of the problematic woman-nature nexus is fundamental to ecofeminist theory and praxis.

While Warren’s new book advocates “methodological humility” (p. 195), her anthologies have promoted an Up-Down dualism between “ecofeminine” versus more properly “ecofeminist” standpoints.<sup>3</sup> The authority for such boundary keeping is said to be given by philosophy itself, “designed to establish claims and positions that its authors or proponents find helpful, plausible, correct” (p. 69). Sometimes, the finality of “proof” is called on. Given this deferral to the professional canon, it is ironic that Warren describes her project as reconceiving “the traditional Western concept of reason” (p. 101). Certainly, she is aware of how competitive patriarchal values have been foundational to the philosophic enterprise (p. 71)—and as sociologists of knowledge such as Habermas demonstrate, the negotiation of plausibility has always been dependent on situated (gendered) human interests. Warren’s uneasy stance *vis à vis* what feminists call “the man of reason” is compounded by her neglect of French feminist thought, for it is the unremitting voice of “difference” from Luce Irigaray and others that has created a public space and legitimation for women to “speak as women.”<sup>4</sup>

Warren’s chapter “How Should We Treat Nature?” maps out the field of environmental ethics with a classificatory schema developed from four heads—house ethicists, reformist, mixed, and radical standpoints. House philosophy is put aside as typically anthropocentric and lacking relevance to ecology. Reformist approaches run to five subsets: moral extensionist (Peter Singer), rights-based (Tom Regan), inherent worth (Paul Taylor), stewardship (Jay

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<sup>3</sup> Victoria Davion, “Is Ecofeminism Feminist?” in Karen Warren, ed., *Ecological Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (London: Methuen, 1984).

McDaniel), virtue ethics (Joseph Des Jardins). The mixed position is represented by Leopold's land ethic. Radicals also have five subsets: deep ecological (Arne Naess), bioregionalism (Kirpatrick Sale), social ecology (with six key features), ecofeminism, and non-Western philosophies (with four key features). Warren argues that by introducing a gender focus, ecofeminism is transformative of all positions; yet, at the same time, she is loath to situate it in the "radical" category. Defying the oxymoron, she maintains, the "version of ecofeminism I describe in this book is a mixed reform and revolutionary position" (p. 98).

Warren provides three reasons for using the label "feminist" and argues that her own ecofeminist philosophy is based on eight necessary or "boundary conditions." It prefers theory in-process and rejects the notion of a detached observer. It assumes that humans are contexted, socially embedded, relational (not abstract individual) selves. It rests on a "situated universalism" whereby universality lies in particular narratives grounded in real "material" lives (p. 99). It is therefore, pluralist and inclusive in focus. As a feminism, it states its corrective bias at the outset. It gives a place to unrepresented values and assumes that the bias of those who are oppressed is less partial. Although Warren does not acknowledge as much, most of these features are shared in common with the main body of ecofeminist literature. As a result, in some respects, the endorsement of them contradicts her self-distancing from "pre-philosophical" and "ecofeminine" voices.

Departing from the socially constructed ethic of care that marks the role of women in most cultures across the globe, Warren argues rather for a "care sensitive ethic" manifesting three key conditions: ability to care, situated universalism, and care practices. The argument does not make plain how this personal "capacity to care" is distinct from a lived gender based ethic of care, nor from the virtue ethic that Warren rejects in traditional philosophy. In related vein, Warren recognizes Gayatri Spivak's proposal for a "strategic essentialism" as politically practical, but the connection between this abstract strategy and the specific oppressions of women is not articulated.<sup>5</sup> However, when Warren writes that an ecofeminist ethic challenges both moral absolutism and relativism in philosophy, she seems to be reaching for a dialectical method whereby historical praxis anchors thought in objective structural/existential conditions. It would be encouraging to see her work develop in this direction because despite many allusions to "process" and "transformative theory" in this book, context exists largely as factual comment alongside the evaluation of dis-embedded philosophical claims.

Animal liberation ethicists such as Singer or Regan and ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard or Carol Adams will no doubt have much to say about Warren's

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<sup>5</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Greta Gaard, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

agnosticism on vegetarianism.<sup>6</sup> One thrust of this agnosticism is framed as a liberal pluralist respect for personal, geographic, and cultural differences. As she puts it, “It is one thing to provide and critique arguments for moral vegetarianism (i.e., to make value judgements): it is quite another to be morally judgemental of the eating practices of others” (p. 130). However, an idealist separation between philosophy versus social change activism is again implicit in this passage. Although Warren’s position puts anthropocentric before biocentric interests, it is not consistently humanist, given the global inequalities that affluent Western meat-eating habits give rise to. At the same time, her formula that “morally acceptable food eating practices do not replicate or reinforce Up-Down systems of domination based on the power and privilege of Ups over Downs” (p. 139), does not cohere with her argument for the protection of cultural difference and individual rights. After all, if a community is deprived of its subsistence by the excess of others, it will hardly be able to actualize its folkways.

The drive to systematize in *Ecofeminist Philosophy* may in part be a response to Callicott’s criticism that ecofeminism is anti-science and reason and a too loosely organized set of claims to constitute a theory. Warren counters that science is “one of the main spheres of support in my visual representation of ecofeminist philosophy” (p. 156) and in the chapter “What is Ecological about Ecofeminist Philosophy?” she argues for a “scientific grounding” of ecofeminist philosophy. She does so not by reviewing the ecological achievements of women such as Miriam Wyman et al. on toxics or Shiva on biodiversity, but by pitting her own version of ecofeminist philosophy against two “malestream” standpoints—hierarchy theory and Leopold’s land ethic.<sup>7</sup>

Warren’s intellectually engaging project to “scientize” ecofeminism opens with an outline of “Six key features of hierarchy theory that make it a promising theoretical ecological grounding for ecofeminist philosophy” (p. 147). As she puts it, ecofeminism has six “receptor sites for hierarchy theory” [sic]. . . . Both are interested in context, viz. observation sets on the one hand, and conceptual frameworks, on the other. Both legitimate multiple vantage points, by which is meant not multiple social voices, but abstract conditions like “care capability,” “situated universalism,” or “care practices.” Both understand the definition of a thing to be given relationally. Both deny relativism but agree that reality is only ever known through a particular investigation. Both recognize that there are better or “more appropriate” sets or arguments. Both use inclusivist integrative frameworks for mediating object versus process. Both respect difference and similarity, i.e., diversity. Both challenge the culture versus nature dualism, showing humans to be in culture and nature (p. 157).

True, ecofeminism and hierarchy theory may display similarities at a high

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<sup>7</sup> Miriam Wyman, ed., *Sweeping the Earth* (Charlottetown, P.E.I.: Gynergy, 1999); Vandana Shiva, ed., *Biopolitics* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

level of neutralizing epistemological scoping, however in daily life, the political context of each narrative is plainly at odds. In terms of the history of ideas, ecofeminist voices speak up, from the experience of domination. Hierarchy theorists speak down, equipped with the class privilege of management. An ecofeminist might play with the systems metaphor, perhaps to give rhetorical legitimation to women's knowledges, while at the same time, parodying the self importance of science. But judging from the tenor of Warren's 4-R test—that good generalization is based on “representative,” “random,” “right size” and “replicable” samples (p. 100)—this is not the case here. Disregarding the contextual sensitivities of science and technology studies or Sandra Harding's classic gender *exposé* of science, the book *Ecofeminist Philosophy* is seriously positivist.<sup>8</sup> When Warren claims that hierarchy theory is non-reductionist, she slides over the fact that it rests on numerical factors processed by machines operating on the basis of a 1/0 logic.

As if science were an unproblematic practice, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* maintains that “hierarchy theory provides an up to date scientific perspective” (p. 148). The assumption is that observation sets fed into cybernetic models will overcome the division between objects versus processes. Warren talks about nanoseconds, stochastics, and noise, taking for granted the electronic mediation of human needs, and a vision of progress that consumes colonized others, like nature and young women silicon slaves. An unwittingly elitist scientism is carried in Warren's point that the lives of women must be “included as data” (p. 156). This blending of ecofeminism with high tech culture helps explain the book's subtitle—*A Western Perspective*. However, by taking this course, Warren lends support to globally dominant race, class, and gender interests, undercutting the critically positioned political voices of women.

Yet, if Warren sets out to ground her ecofeminism in ecological science, the commitment is all but cancelled by a footnote disclaimer: “I am not defending . . . I am only discussing bonds that link ecofeminist philosophy with hierarchy theory” (p. 171). Thus, ultimately, the reader is left wondering about just where and how Warren's ecofeminism is grounded. The author attributes her own moments of ecofeminist insight to ungendered Western leisure activities, not for example, universally necessary labors such as childbirth or housekeeping. Again, reflecting the philosophic divide between idea versus matter, Warren rejects intrinsic value as too limiting a criterion of moral considerability, in favor of a “groundless” attitude such as that of loving one's child (p. 76). But by whose logic is parental feeling “groundless”? Surely materially embodied experiences which remind us of our place in nature offer the firmest and deepest foundation for ethics.

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<sup>8</sup> Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1986).

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