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How Dualism and the Patriarchal View of Women and Nature as the 'Other' Result in the Subordination of Women and the Degradation of the Environment

As suggested by ecofeminist theorists, significant parallels exist between the subordination of women and the degradation of the environment. When examining the root cause of both the subordination of women and the degradation of the environment, it is evident that the mindsets and societal structures prevalent in patriarchal society are major contributors. In particular, the dualistic relationship between humans and the non-human environment and between men and women in patriarchal society results in the view of nature and women as the 'other'. Characterizing women and nature as the 'other' allows for the operation of dualism through backgrounding, hyperseparation, relational definition, objectification, and homogenization, all of which ultimately result in the exploitation of the 'other'. To minimize, and eventually eradicate, the subordination of women and the degradation of the environment, a new conception of differences must replace the current dualistic worldview.

The connection between the subordination of women and the degradation of the environment is most clearly delineated by ecofeminist thought. As Karen Warren points out, "occurrences of environmental destruction are often coincident with hardships for women" (Clarke 195). Yet, the destruction of the environment and the hardships felt by women are

linked in more ways than merely through coincidental occurrences. In particular, “ecofeminist theory asserts that sexism and environmental degradation are interconnected processes” that result from “a common hierarchical social structure that simultaneously devalues both women and nature” (Norgaard and York 508).

The existence of a hierarchical social structure that devalues both women and nature is especially apparent in societies in which men dominate, i.e. patriarchal societies. Characteristic qualities of patriarchy include “legal, social, economic, and political relations that validate and enforce the sovereignty of male heads of families over dependent persons in the household” (Ruether 1104). More generally, the term “patriarchy” refers to a male-oriented society. Within patriarchy, “the values, ideologies, institutions, and economic systems that shape human-environmental relationships are themselves gendered,” which explains how “these factors enable sexism and environmental degradation in mutually reinforcing ways” (Norgaard and York 508).

To fully examine the values, ideologies, institutions, and economic systems that shape the hierarchical social structure characteristic of patriarchal society, it is necessary to explore the philosophical concepts central to this modern thinking. In particular, the presence of dualism in western culture contributes a great deal to the social structure of patriarchal society.

Characteristic of dualism is a “systematic construction of mutually exclusive oppressor and oppressed identities” (Hawkins 159). Examples of dualistic structures prevalent in patriarchal society include culture/nature, mind/body, male/female, and subject/object. This type of binary opposition leads to an either/or categorization, which, thus, allows for the creation of a distinctive oppressor as separate from the oppressed. For instance, culture is opposed to nature. Culture is more highly valued than nature. As a result, culture has the capability of dominating and exploiting nature for its own advantage.

As articulated by Val Plumwood, dualism employs five characteristic features, which allow for its “demarcation of a superior ‘master’ class from that of a colonized, subordinated ‘other’” (Hawkins 161). The first feature of dualism is the denial or minimization of the contributions of the ‘other’ to the master. This denial, also referred to as backgrounding, effectively reduces the value of the contributions of the ‘other’ and is exemplified in society’s devaluation of the contributions of women to the workforce and the family. In the dualism of nature and culture, this feature is seen when humans fail to acknowledge the necessity of nature to the existence and survival of humankind.

Similarly, the second feature of dualism is a hyperseparation, or radical exclusion, “whereby an absolute discontinuity, a difference not of degree but of kind, is postulated between the master and the ‘other’” (Hawkins 161). This feature of dualism allows the characterization of differences between the master and the ‘other’ to be not only opposite in kind, but also opposite in value. That is, the traits of the master have positive value whereas the traits of the ‘other’ have negative value.

In addition to backgrounding and hyperseparation, the incorporation of relational definition is an additional feature of dualistic thinking. Relational definition, “whereby the ‘other’ is defined only in terms of the lack of some quality possessed by the master or, conversely, only in terms of qualities that can be incorporated into the master’s needs and desires” works to define the master as the norm while further defining the ‘other’ as abnormal (Hawkins 161). In this feature of dualism, the ‘other’ cannot be defined independently of the master; rather, the value of the ‘other’ is relative to and defined by the master.

Plumwood further characterizes dualism by describing a fourth feature: instrumentalism, or objectification. In this case, the 'other' is "recognized only as an object, resource, or means for the master's ends rather than as a subject with ends of its own" (Hawkins 161). Since the 'other' does not have ends of its own, the 'other' is objectified and utilized by the master. The purpose of the 'other' is to serve the master and to fulfill the master's needs.

The final feature of dualism which Val Plumwood articulates is homogenization. Homogenization, or stereotyping, of the 'other', results in a view of all members of the oppressed class as "uniform and stereotypic, stripped of all individuality or within-class difference" (Hawkins 161). This feature allows for the reinforcement and naturalization of differences between the master and the 'other'.

Ultimately, Plumwood's clarification of the features of dualism demonstrates the problems inherent in and resultant of dualism. Dualistic thinking justifies the domination and exploitation of the 'other' through backgrounding, hyperseparation, the incorporation of relational definition, objectification, and homogenization. Each particular feature of dualism contributes to the creation of the 'other', which, subsequently allows for the exploitation and domination of the 'other'. Specifically, these features of dualism operate to subordinate women and exploit the environment for the benefit of the master, i.e. men in patriarchal society.

Evidence of dualistic thinking is prevalent throughout much of philosophy. As early as the seventeenth century, Descartes "crystallized the distinction between body and mind" as a metaphysical substance dualism (Miller 159). Descartes's metaphysics "achieves the hyperseparation of human mind from the 'mechanism' of nature" as exemplified by his claim that the mind is capable of surviving without the body (Hawkins 162). Opponents of substance

dualism, however, note that the mind and body interact and cannot be characterized as two completely separate substances. Still, much of philosophy has dealt with “the mind-body problem”, which indicates the prevalence of dualistic thinking in modern society.

Although famous for his “fundamental distinction between phenomena (the objects of experience) and noumena (things-in-themselves)”, Immanuel Kant contributed to the modern dualistic worldview more so with his distinctions between humans and nature (Miller 160). Despite his rejection of instrumentalism, Kant’s moral philosophy illustrates both the hyperseparation and objectification characteristic of dualism. Kant defines humans as “fundamentally different from all else in nature” and proceeds to put ‘others’ “in a different, ‘lower’ moral category, [which] allows for the use and destruction of these ‘others’ in the name of human ends” (Moyer 81). Kant defines man as the subject of morality and “the final purpose of creation to which all of nature is subordinated” (Moyer 82). Kant’s distinctive definition of humans in relation to ‘others’, thus, resulted in his normative dualisms between humans/nature, humans/animals, and humans/culture.

Existentialist philosophers have also developed a dualistic type of thought, but in regards to consciousness. The philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir “establish the transcendence of consciousness in the sense that consciousness itself is not an object of consciousness, nor a subjective idea that exists in consciousness, but something other that can only be specified via its absolute difference from any of the objects of which it is conscious” (Green 4). Thus, without the conception of an ‘other’ that is opposite from oneself, one cannot become a conscious being. De Beauvoir suggests that men become conscious subjects by objectifying women as the ‘other’ and by viewing women as absolutely different from themselves. A woman, according to de Beauvoir, suffers from a “dissonance between [her]

consciousness of [herself] as an autonomous subject and the evaluation of [herself] offered by the oppressor” (Green 11). While women may feel as though they are autonomous conscious subjects, they are continually defined as the ‘other’ and as opposite to men. Further, “since there is no self, according to existentialism, apart from the cultural identities that humans choose to play, this leaves the oppressed without any authentic identity” (Green 11). Women are the ‘other’, lacking both full autonomy and identity.

Similar to de Beauvoir’s philosophy that women are viewed as the ‘other’ due to a dualistic worldview, feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray suggests that the male gender takes itself to be the only subject, thus leading to “a single model of subjectivity [that] denies the existence of others” (Caldwell 19). Irigaray argues that even though women are defined as the ‘other’ and as opposite to men, patriarchal society fails to acknowledge women as separate from men. Rather, she suggests that “an authentic feminine subjectivity cannot be articulated within the patriarchal discourse that has constructed us” (Green 14). Through this argument, Irigaray confirms how the relational definition feature of dualism acts to subordinate women in patriarchal society. A woman is only defined insofar as her characteristics relate to those of men. This is the type of phallogocentric economy of representation Irigaray argues against in her critiques of Sigmund Freud’s *Femininity*. In much of Freud’s psychoanalysis, he fails to recognize and define female characteristics independently of male characteristics. Rather, as Irigaray argues, Freud analyzes women according to preconceived ideals of femininity, which are majorly defined as characteristics merely lacking masculine attributes.

Seemingly subject to multiple aspects of dualistic thought, Freud tends to homogenize, or stereotype, females in addition to characterizing them only in relation to males. As seen in the

following excerpt from *Femininity*, Freud fails to consider that there are differences *among* women, rather than just between women and men.

The discussion of this has gained special attractiveness from the distinction between the sexes. For the ladies, whenever some comparison seemed to turn out unfavorable to their sex, were able to utter a suspicion that we, the male analysts, had been unable to overcome certain deeply-rooted prejudices against what was feminine, and that this was being paid for in the partiality of our researches. We, on the other hand, standing on the group of bisexuality, had no difficulty in avoiding the impoliteness. We had only to say: ‘This doesn’t apply to *you*. You’re the exception; on this point you’re more masculine than feminine.’ (Freud 116-117)

Here, dualism and, more specifically, homogenization work to eliminate any differences among women by assuming that all women are identical in terms of their femininity. Freud stereotypes his female subjects as being feminine, which results in the reinforcement and naturalization of differences between men and women. Only to “avoid impoliteness” does Freud acknowledge that a small number of women may differ from his stereotype, yet only insofar as being more masculine than feminine. Thus, as demonstrated by Freud’s psychoanalysis of women, dualistic thought that characterizes women as the ‘other’ has contributed to the subordination of women through a cultural repression of female sexuality.

Further analysis of Irigaray’s argument that the view of women as the ‘other’ results in the subordination of women demonstrates that a similar view of nature results in the degradation of the environment. In particular, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray “makes the point that it is man’s thinking of woman as a place for him to dwell in that is the source of unethical gender relations” (Mills 413). When considering the environment, it is apparent that the main causes of environmental destruction stem from a similar view of the environment as a dwelling

place for humans. The non-human environment exists only to serve humans, which compares to the objectification of women to fulfill the needs of men. In particular, humans consider “other beings as ‘being there’ solely as a place for humans, of worth only insofar as they contribute to human sustainability” (Mills 413). Using the environment in this way is “an extension of the masculine’s non-reciprocal use of the feminine as dwelling place” (Mills 413).

The view of the environment as a dwelling place for humans certainly derives from the type of dualistic thinking that has pervaded much of patriarchal society. To define the environment as all “beings-other-than-human” results in a hyperseparation, in which everything in nature is opposite to humans. Even with scientific advances that reveal the close relationship of humans to other species, “ethicists seem to have done relatively little to integrate evolutionary insights into our moral philosophy, and western culture at large--indeed, much of western science--remains thoroughly anthropocentric in orientation” (Hawkins 160). Nature, natural resources, and animals are homogenized into one concatenation –*the environment*--which is then exploited by humans as a dwelling place and, more generally, as the ‘other’.

Patriarchal society and, more specifically, the masculine cause the exploitation of the environment through masculine desire, which “typically is characterized by a dominance and aggression [and] tends to inhibit the chosen object-place (woman/all other beings) from an equivalent reciprocal action in relation to the active subject (man/humans)” (Mills 418). That is, the masculine denies the ‘other’ (women/nature) equality by minimizing the contributions of the ‘other’ and by refusing to be-a-place-for. Furthermore, the masculine “considers the ‘other’ as an object to be possessed for immediate, physical--emotional consumption--excretion, rather than opening the senses to a reciprocal participation in the jouissance of the infinite-eternal dance of all beings, a ‘permanent becoming’” (Mills 419). Both women and nature are objects to be

possessed by men and humans, respectively, thus demonstrating how dualistic thinking leads to the subordination of women and the degradation of the environment.

Since dualistic thought and the view of women and nature as the ‘other’ significantly contribute to the exploitation of women and nature, a solution to these problems must be aimed at correcting dualistic thought and eliminating the hierarchical social structure characteristic of patriarchal society. In particular, forming a new conception of differences between males and females and between humans and the non-human environment will result in a more equal relationship between women and men and between humans and nature. For Irigaray, “difference must be multiple” and “must be understood in terms of true otherness” (Trott 23). Irigaray further argues that “the One must be eliminated altogether, and difference understood as the relation of all the existing particulars in relation to one another” (Trott 23). Thus, a new conception of differences as understood in relation to all particulars would replace the current dualistic understanding of differences. Irigaray suggests that this new conception of differences could be completed in the following sequence:

The preparatory drama, the process of deconstructing the present construction, needs to take the form of (1) *the masculine* (agent) initiating (2) *a process of withdrawal-reversal* (action), a separation whereby he is reconstituted as a vessel in a way that spontaneously unfolds (3) the opening up of an in-between space (place) conducive to (4) a reciprocity of receptivity-activity (agency), ‘the divine in spirit or mind’ between lovers (humans/all beings), for co-regenerating (5) an infinite and eternal becoming (non-purpose). (Mills 420)

For Irigaray’s solution of a “mutually beneficial, sustainable relating” to succeed, the masculine must make the initiative to create a space which will allow for the reciprocity of both women and nature (Mills 414). This would allow space for the feminine and for nature to be

acknowledged as equals to and part of the masculine and humanity. Many ecofeminist philosophers agree that a new conception of differences should be constructed in order to combat the exploitation of women and the environment. Humanity “should not be conceptualized as an undifferentiated mass, since to do so would be to overlook many important differences between human groups” (Hawkins 136). Similarly, nature “should not be conceptualized as undifferentiated and homogeneous in its otherness” (Hawkins 136). Rather, it is essential for the well-being of women and nature to recognize that neither men and women nor humans and nature act in a purely dualistic relationship. In fact, as illustrated by postmodern and ecofeminist philosophers, “the failure to recognize the ways in which humans are connected to and dependent on nature contributes to the destruction of nature” (Moyer 81).

In order to cease the oppression of women and the destruction of the environment, humans must develop “a non-dualistic understanding of ourselves as biological beings interacting with and partly constructing our world” to empower “in our efforts to overcome all forms of oppression and put an end to ecological destruction” (Hawkins 187). Plumwood suggests that the development of a non-dualistic understanding can be reached through a virtue ethic, in which greater attention is given to concepts such as “friendship, respect, care, community, and responsibility” (Hawkins 187).

Ultimately, the relationship between dualistic thought and the formation of the view of women and the environment as the ‘other’ is quite apparent. Influential philosophers including Descartes and Kant have shaped dualism into the current dualistic worldwide characteristic of patriarchal society. While the dualistic conception of differences is prevalent within much of philosophy, dualism problematizes the relationships between men and women and between humans and nature. In each dualistic relationship, one becomes the master while one becomes

the 'other'. As supported by Plumwood, features of dualism include a backgrounding or denial of the contributions of the 'other'; a hyperseparation of the master and the 'other'; a relational definition, in which the 'other' is defined in terms of the master; the objectification of the 'other' for the master's end; and a homogenization of all members of the oppressed class. Each feature of dualism functions to exploit or degrade the 'other', i.e. women and nature.

In recent years, the validity of dualistic relationships has come under scrutiny. Feminist and ecofeminist philosophers note the exploitative nature of dualism as well as the continuity of differences between all persons and throughout nature. To place men and women in a strictly oppositional relationship according to their differences is incorrect. Similarly, humans and the non-human environment are not separate or opposite; rather, the two are connected, especially since humans are dependent on nature. Thus, a new conception of differences is necessary to replace the current dualistic worldview. It is difficult to predict whether this new conception will arise from an understanding of similarities and differences among all particulars or whether a type of new virtue ethic will eventually lead to a non-dualistic understanding of the world. In either case, it is worth noting that the presence of patriarchy and its hierarchical structure will most certainly create difficulties on the path toward a new conception of differences. Yet, as the oppression of women and the destruction of the environment continue, a sense of urgency will likely hasten the progress to a non-dualistic worldview.

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