

# Ecofeminism

**1. The Logic of Domination:** Here's what you do if you want to justify your dominion over nature:

**Step 1: Mark out a difference.** First find a **difference** between you and nature.

**Step 2: Declare your superiority.** Next, declare that things on YOUR side of the difference are **superior** to the things on the other side of it.

**Step 3: Superiority justifies domination.** Finally, assert that it is permissible for superior things to **subordinate** inferior things.

Sound familiar? It's the logic that has been used time and time again to justify dominion over nature. For instance, here's a Cohen-style argument for an anthropocentric view:

1. **Difference:** Humans are highly rational, while plants, animals, and rocks are not.
2. Whatever is highly rational is **morally superior** to whatever is not.
3. If X is morally superior to Y, then X is **morally justified in subordinating** Y.
4. Therefore, humans are morally justified in subordinating plants, animals, rocks, etc.

But notice that this is EXACTLY the same kind of logic that has historically been used to subordinate women—or, for that matter, anyone else, for just about any reason, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, and so on. Historically, oppressors have found a (supposed) difference, marked it out as (supposedly) superior, and then used that superiority claim to justify our domination of the (supposedly) "inferior" thing.

So, inherently, **feminism opposes the logic of domination**, because it is used to justify patriarchy, or sexist oppression. But, the logic of domination is the foundation of ALL kinds of domination and oppression, says Karen Warren—including what she calls "naturism", or the belief that it is permissible to dominate nature itself. Therefore, at its core, feminists must also be opposed to this hierarchical approach to environmental ethics. Thus, **ecological feminism** (or **ecofeminism** for short) is born – i.e., the idea that feminist goals, and an undermining of the hierarchical way of thinking that justifies our dominion over and destruction of nature, are inextricably linked.

Let's take a look at the three steps that are used to justify domination.

**2. Value Dualisms and Value-Hierarchical Thinking:** The first two steps occur in one of a couple of different ways:

- (a) **Value-Hierarchical Thinking:** We identify some spectrum or series, and claim that one end of that series or spectrum is *better* than the other.

As Warren puts it, "'up-down' thinking which places higher value, status, or prestige on what is "up" rather than on what is 'down'".

[We see this time and time again, in Mary Anne Warren's appeal to degrees of rationality as grounds for greater moral consideration; or Schmidtz's appeal to rationality, sensation, and nutrition (his traits X, Y, and Z, objecting to biocentrism); or in what Leopold called The Land Pyramid, where we have viewed each layer of the pyramid—soil, plants, insects, herbivores, carnivores, apex predators, human beings—as successively more valuable than the last. And so on.

This way of thinking might even be baked into the very way that we **represent** the world around us, which further lends itself to claims of superiority, and then domination. For instance, consider the mere fact that the most developed nations are represented as being on the "top" of the planet, when in fact there is no top! Fun video about this [here](#).]

- (b) **Value Dualisms:** We carve out the world as *binary*, dividing things into two opposing categories, and claim that one side of the pair is *better* than the other.

In Warren's words, "disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than as complementary) and exclusive (rather than as inclusive), and which place higher value (status, prestige) on one disjunct rather than the other (e.g., dualisms which give higher value or status to that which has historically been identified as 'mind,' 'reason,' and 'male' than to that which has historically been identified as 'body,' 'emotion,' and 'female')".

[In addition to mind/body, male/female, reason/emotion, consider also: developed/ undeveloped, abled/disabled, young/old, and even binary/non-binary! And of course, guess which side of the dualism those in power insist is the "better" side? Why, it's the one that they're on, of course!]

[Interesting historical note: It is sometimes said that one of the core contributions to this dualistic way of thinking was Rene Descartes's (Cartesian) **Substance Dualism**. Briefly, Descartes claimed to have proved that human beings are composed of both a physical body, and a non-physical mind, or soul. For, it was possible to doubt the existence of any body—after all, he might be hallucinating, or tricked by some powerful deceiver into THINKING that he is perceiving a physical object, when in fact he is not. Yet, it was NOT possible to doubt the existence of his thinking mind—for how could he be deceived into THINKING that he is thinking, when in fact he is not??? That's impossible. He concluded that human beings have an immaterial soul, and this is the source of all thought.

Everything else—animals, plants, etc.—lack souls, Descartes thought. So, they have no conscious experiences. This is how Descartes was able to not bat an eye when he did things like nailing live dogs to walls and cutting them open to study their still-beating hearts. (This doesn't hurt dogs, he said, because obviously they do not have souls, and are therefore incapable of experiencing pain!)

Perhaps this concept goes back even further, before 17<sup>th</sup> c. Descartes all the way to ancient Greece, where Plato not only argued that we have souls, but also that physical objects are mere reflections or shadows of the perfect, immaterial forms of each thing, which resided in a non-physical realm. And only by philosophically training our minds could we come to know the forms—thus further solidifying the link between the mental and the immaterial, which was thought to be **better** and **more real** than the physical.

How is this relevant to ecofeminism? Well, another way of using the value dualisms to claim superiority over others is by conceptually **identifying** or **linking up** those whom you want to subordinate with the supposedly inferior side of a dualism. For instance, we could claim that men are more associated with the **mental** (and reasoning, thinking, etc.) while women are more associated with the **body** (and emotions, passions, birthing, etc.). Similarly, we could claim that white people are more associated with the mental ; or humans in general (Cohen's appeal to human rationality?), or sentient things in general (Singer's appeal to conscious/mental experiences, i.e., sentience?).]

Note: Warren is not claiming that value-hierarchical thinking is in ITSELF immoral, or unjust. In some contexts, it is obviously fine and good.

For instance, it is perfectly acceptable to say, "I've organized this data into a hierarchy. This data here at the top of the list is the most valuable, this data here at the bottom is the least valuable." And it is obviously true that things are *contextually* better than other

things in certain ways. For instance, eyes are better than ears at detecting colors. Hammers are better than screwdrivers at driving nails into walls. And it's even true that humans are better than plants and animals at engaging in critical thinking and reasoning. The problem is that we don't stop there. Rather, we then go on to say that (a) being better in some context makes us better *simpliciter*; i.e., that we therefore have greater *inherent worth*! And (b) that being "better" justifies SUBORDINATING the "worse" thing. Both of these claims seem false. Warren writes,

"The problem is not simply *that* value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms are used, but *the way* in which each has been used in *oppressive conceptual frameworks* to establish inferiority and to justify subordination. It is the logic of domination, *coupled with* value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms, which "justifies" subordination."

**3. The Logic of Domination:** Ultimately, all of the above results in a logic of domination—the core of which is the third premise of our argument above, which is that **superiority justifies domination**. In Warren's words, it is "a structure of argumentation which leads to a justification of subordination". All together:

1. **Difference:** I have property P, and you do not.
2. Whatever has property P is **morally superior** to whatever does not.
3. If X is morally superior to Y, then X is **morally justified in subordinating** Y.
4. Therefore, I am morally justified in subordinating you.

Note that, while premise 3 is the most glaringly false premise, we can jump ship at ANY point here. For instance, we could:

- Deny the **distinction** claim. For instance, IS THERE even such a thing as mind distinct from body? IS THERE such a thing as reason totally isolated and divorced from emotion? If not, then step one fails.
- Deny the **superiority** claim. IS IT TRUE that reason is better than emotion? That mind is better than body? It raises the question, "Better than at doing WHAT?" Better than lifting objects? No. One thing will be better in some contexts but not others. But, being better in SOME contexts doesn't just make something "better than" *simpliciter*. A hammer is better than a screwdriver for getting nails into walls. But that doesn't make hammers better than screwdrivers, *simpliciter*.
- Recall that there's often an intermediate claim here. Something like: Women are more ASSOCIATED with body than mind, or with emotion rather than reason. Therefore, they fall into that category in the value hierarchy. You can **deny the**

**association** claim too. For instance, at other points in history, it was once thought that emotion was quite valuable, a sign that you could FEEL more—and it was at that point associated more with men. Once emotion fell out of fashion, we began to associate it with women instead. There does not seem to be any objective or inherent association of women to one category rather than another.

- Finally, you can deny the **domination** claim. Why in the heck would it follow that it is permissible to dominate or rule over something simply because you're "better than" it?

**4. Toward a New (Ecofeminist) Environmental Ethic:** Warren then moves on to propose an entirely new approach to environmental ethics.

Let's abandon the sort of logic that led to patriarchy, slavery, and domination of nature.

What got us there? One plausible answer: **Arrogance**.

Side note: Among analytic philosophers, there's this **obsession** with trying to figure out what the ESSENCE of a thing is – we want to label every individual as a certain KIND of thing, where "kinds" are defined by certain traits that ALL AND ONLY members of that kind have that exact set of traits. So, like, "mammal" = warm-blooded, hair-having vertebrates (ALL AND ONLY mammals have this collection of 3 traits).

But, Warren points out, our identities are not reducible to some single category. Our identities are in flux, are **contextual** – I am now a teacher, at home a husband, a friend. I'm a son, a brother, a customer, a mentor, a shoulder to cry on, a source of kitty treats and scratches behind a kitty ear, a squirrel-scaring noise-making stomping-through-quiet-woods disruption, and so on. In short, **what we are** isn't reducible to some single, three-property "essence", but is rather defined by a whole slew of **relations** with others and the world around us.

What does this have to do with arrogance? Well, think about the arrogant person. They take one look at you and they think they've got you ALL figured out. When you talk they're not even listening – they're just planning their next words. (Probably planning a statement about how you're wrong.) Why not? Because they don't need to listen to you. There's nothing you could say that they don't already know. You're not a SOURCE of anything new. To the extent that you are even recognized as a thing at all, it's typically just a thing to be conquered, to be proven wrong, or to be used, dominated.

The traditional approach of analytic philosophy to boil a thing down to its essence lends itself to this mindset. (No doubt, at least in part because it was a male-only profession for most of history!) This has led us to where we are today:

“Any environmental movement or ethic based on arrogant perception builds a moral hierarchy of beings and assumes some common denominator of moral considerability in virtue of which like beings deserve similar treatment or moral consideration and unlike beings do not.”

Cohen: “Either you’re a member of a species that can exercise moral claims or you’re not!”

Singer: “Either you’re sentient, or you’re not!”

Regan: “Either you’re a subject of a life, or you’re not!”

Taylor: “Either you’re a teleological center of life, or you’re not!”

...And PS, the first kind of thing is superior to the second kind of thing.

What is Warren proposing instead? Answer: **Love**.

The loving person is “one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination. One must look at the thing. One must look and listen and check and question.”

This is the opposite of arrogance. Love is characterized (at least in part) by **humility**. I DON’T have you “all figured out”. I can-NOT “sum you up” with a single glance. Quite the opposite. The loving eye will “presuppose the Endless Interestingness of the Universe” (from Marilyn Frye) Think about that for a second... You are an INFINITE. I could NEVER have you all figured out. From this *loving* perspective, EVERY thing in the world is a potentially ENDLESS source of wonder, awe, learning, admiration, respect.

What sort of *ethic* does this generate? Well, ask: Could someone who stands in perfect awe and humility over a stand of trees—with all its soft mosses, and frolicking squirrels, singing birds, dapples of sunlight—could they bring themselves to cut it down? No.

[Side note: It’s sort of genius here is that the very STYLE of the paper changes as she shifts away from the logic of domination and arrogance to that of love and humility. She transitions away from the mental, the analytic, value dualistic (this is the correct side and you’re wrong!), syllogistic PROOF style, and toward a narrative, emotional, empathy-invoking, intuitive FEELING-inducing, TOGETHERNESS (we’re all a part of the same system, we’re in this together!) style of writing.]

A final note: Notice that arrogance will surely breed **boredom**. If I've already got everything all figured out, then there is no longer any mystery, nothing new to know, or discover. And there's evidence that most of us are bored. We're SO bored in fact, that we don't hesitate to bulldoze huge stands of forest, snuffing out all life there, ignoring its infinite mysteries, to pave it through with asphalt, to build cars and iphones and clothing stores—which we then in turn get bored with, so we are always on the move toward ever-yet even newer things (which of course we'll eventually get bored with too).

The cure for the boredom that comes with arrogance is love; is radical humility. When I admit that I can never know it all. That's when I come to recognize: It's infinite. After reading this, go take a moment to just BE in your environment, and fall in LOVE with it, and see it for what it is: An invitation to stand in awe of infinite mystery and wonder. Now, get out there and go admire the velvety textures as you pet some moss. Go drink in the lemony sweet fragrances of a magnolia blossom. Go bask in the dappled sunlight sneaking through the leaves of the trees, serenaded by birdsong. Go on, git!