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Who Am I? Who Are You? The Identification of Self
and Other in Three Ecosophies

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The identification of self has become a significant point of discussion within ecosophy circles. Who you are in relation to others is fundamental to culture, and in building alternatives to the dominant cultural paradigm. Several ecosophers have argued that the question of our self-identification is one key social source of the present problematic relationship between humans and the natural world. Two philosophies in particular, ecological feminism, and some deep ecology movement supporters have devoted considerable ink to the examination of this idea, among others. This essay examines the different approaches as well as similarities between them on the subject of self and other.

In addition, this essay undertakes to compare and contrast not just between the two ecosophies but between the ecosophies and Native American perspectives. For many followers of deep ecology and ecological feminism, the example and precedent of indigenous peoples has been of considerable significance in formulating theory. The "environmental movement" as a whole has been interested in the example of Native Americans from its earliest antecedents and remains caught in a fascinated if problematic relationship with indigenous cultures.¹ Many supporters of the deep ecology movement claim to have been particularly influenced in their ideas by indigenous perspectives. It seems, therefore, worthwhile while examining the different perspectives on relations with others in the deep ecology movement and ecological feminism, to look as well at one source of inspiration, to place the discussions in some perspective.

Native American Worldviews

The fundamental characteristic of an indigenous sense of self is that they are unable to separate individual self from the larger natural community. Laguna Paula Gunn Allen stated that, in the indigenous perspective, "We are the land," is the fundamental basis of Native American life. She goes on to distinguish this relational sense of self from that of the "nature lover," often a characteristic of Western culture. She writes,

Nor is this relationship one of mere 'affinity' for the Earth. It is not a matter of being "close to nature." The relationship is more one of identity, in the mathematical sense, than of affinity. The Earth is, in a very real sense, the same as ourself (or selves) ...That knowledge, though perfect, does not have associated with it the exalted romance of the sentimental 'nature lovers', nor does it have, at base, any self-conscious 'appreciation' of the land, or of even the primary event of unification. It is a matter of fact, one known equably from infancy, remembered and honoured at levels of awareness that go beyond consciousness, and that extend long roots into primary levels of mind, language, perception and all the basic aspects of being....²

A sense of embeddedness in the rest of the world has profound implications for how one chooses to live and interact with others (which may or may not be "ecological"). It is also one reason why the displacement of Native Americans from their lands, and the subsequent damage to that land, was, and is, so socially and psychically devastating. As Allen points out, the despair that appears in many writings by Native Americans is the despair of having lost "that perfect peace of being together with all that surrounds one."³ Peter Matthiessen agrees that this understanding is found consistently across a wide diversity of indigenous cultures:

It is not a matter of 'worshipping nature,' as anthropologists suggest: to worship nature, one must stand apart from it and call it 'nature' or 'the human habitat' or 'the environment.' For the Indian, there is no separation. Man is an aspect of nature . . . Respect for nature is reverence for the Creator and it is also self-respecting, since man and nature, though not the same thing, are not different....⁴

Or consider part of a sacred Navajo chant, designed to remind the person every day of their connections with life: ¡POEM¡The mountains, I become part of it... The herbs, the fir tree, I become part of it. The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering waters, I become part of it. The wilderness, the dew drops, the pollen... I become part of it.⁵

Momaday, a Kiowa writer, describes living apart from the land with horror, "such isolation is unimaginable."⁶ As Allen confirms, all poetry, ceremony, song, and story remind an Indian of their part in a living evolving whole by virtue of their willing participation.⁷

This is not to imply that Native Americans were unable to distinguish themselves from the rest of nature. The reports of encounters past and present suggest that Native Americans were often highly individualistic people, with a great deal of pride and arrogance. Nor does this argument deny that such an identification did not always lead to positive ecological consequences. Yet indigenous peoples were still able to see themselves as part of some larger community without sacrificing that sense of individuality. Nor does understanding of self-within-whole lead to glossing over differences, especially the differences between individuals. Deloria points out that the existence of differences reflects the Creator's desire and is part of the strength of creation. There is not, therefore, a need "to gain a sense of unity or homogeneity."⁸ This is a point that often appears to escape some supporters of the deep ecology movement and ecofeminism in their anguished searching for a sense of self that is not fragmented.

Unfortunately, in their grasping for alternatives, non-Natives often seize upon the Native American "model" without a clear understanding of the complexity and internal integrity of that model. Anthropologist Barre Toelken skewers this

Western reaction neatly, using the Navajo as an example:

The [Navajo] system is impressive to us because of its assumption that all phenomena are integrated and interdependent, not extractable and abstractable from each other. Similarly, individuals are integrated and interdependent with other individuals in the culture, and are not encouraged or expected to be totally independent agents. While individuality is allowed and expected, it is always tailored to the larger ritual expectations of the group. Rather than viewing the Navajos as some kind of primitive desert "flower children," moving easily through a harmonious world because of their recognition of relationship among all things in nature, we need to recognize that the Navajos are participants in an extremely rigorous philosophical and ritual system which places demands on individuals that most non-Navajos would find it difficult to cope with (emphasis added).⁹

Ecosophers can find inspiration and instruction within Native American worldviews. However, attempting to borrow and transplant these concepts into a Western framework is inappropriate, morally questionable, and probably subject to failure.

The Transpersonal Ecology Worldview

Theorists interested in the deep ecology movement have been particularly determined to describe a new sense of understanding of how the individual self relates to the broader world. Warwick Fox argues that the focus on re-defining the self in relation to others is what distinguishes deep ecology supporters from other ecosophies.¹⁰ Further, deep ecological theorists argue that our inadequate understanding of the self in relation to other is at the heart of the failure of Western culture.

In addition to Native American belief, Naess's ecosophy-T seems to have adapted its theory of the self from the theories of seventeenth century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza and from Eastern religions. There are, however, other clear influences such as the work of Martin Buber.¹¹ The choice of Spinoza is a logical one; the founder of deep ecology, Arne Naess, is a Spinozan scholar. Naess's interpretation of Spinozan theory, in ecosophy-T, is that adequate individual self-realization must necessarily leads to Self-realization. Written as small "s," self represents the narrow, atomistic, egoistic individual sense of self. Written as large "S," Self refers to a wide, expansive, non-egoistic sense of self.¹² Thus the realization of the full potential of the individual leads to an exploration of that individual's relationship with the larger world, resulting in a broader sense of self.

Perhaps Naess explains himself most clearly. With regard to his interpretation of self-within-Self, he writes:

Self-realization at its absolute maximum is...the nature experience of oneness in diversity...The minimum is the self-realization by more or less consistent egotism - by the narrowest experience of what constitutes one's self and a maximum of alienation. As empirical beings we dwell somewhere in between, but increased maturity involves increasing the wideness of self.

The terms mystical union and mysticism are avoided here...strong mystical traditions stress the dissolution of individual selves into a nondiversified supreme whole. Both from a cultural and ecological point of view diversity and individuality are essential (emphasis in original).¹³

In this, the Naess is clearly working towards something similar to an indigenous perspective.

Naess expands Spinoza to include Eastern philosophical traditions. The Eastern influence is also apparent in the writings of those expanding upon Naess's original ideas. Drengson and Devall and Sessions, for example, have used the Taoist idea of individual self operating within a "single unfolding reality," a different way of describing the consciousness of self within a larger world.¹⁴

Self-identification as part of an ecosophy is a way of recovering from a profound sense of alienation from others and from nature. Alienation is a creeping "unconscious" process to be overcome in a return to a more "wholesome" existence.¹⁵ Re-connecting with the world at large, say Naess, Fox, Devall, Sessions and others, means learning to recognize and acknowledge the essential "commonalities" between the individual self and other selves.

Experiencing commonality means recognizing and valuing very subtle similarities that are physical, emotional or mental in origin. Thus, one can experience commonality with a tree, although the similarities between a tree and a human are rather distant. Recognizing commonality creates an obligation to develop a relationship with other selves that treats another being's needs as if they were our own.¹⁶ We don't need to know a tiger personally to care about its needs for prey and forest cover. Those tiger interests are our interests as well, because the tiger is part of our reality.

Recognizing human interconnections with the rest of nature, perceiving the self as part of larger community, are positive steps. But as far as some supporters of the deep ecology movement have taken it, at least in the context of five billion humans on Earth, the idea of self-within-Self gives little help in making difficult choices: Caribou or electricity. Agricultural lands or marshes. The response

to this criticism by many supporters of deep ecology in writing is to call for an assessment of individual circumstances on a case by case basis. This is an inadequate solution. What is required is a more practical grappling of how a sense of self-within-Self works itself out in the real world. It is here that the biggest distinction between Native American worldviews and those supporting Naess types of ecosophies become apparent.

Native American worldviews are inextricably tied to the here and now and to relationships with specific places and beings. They are intimately involved in making a living from a place, while attempting to honour its requirements. Yet even this millennia old acknowledgement has not made choices clear or easy, particularly in today's world. Poverty and poor economic prospects have led many tribes to make very difficult choices (often under pressure from various governments) which result in significant environmental and social degradation. Uranium and oil mining on the southwestern reservations or in Canada and Alaska are particularly painful cases in point.¹⁷ Yet without any long term sense of how self-within-Self understandings would work themselves out in practical terms, deep ecology supporters are urging similar understandings on us. One interesting question to be answered would be how many practising supporters of the deep ecology movement are also practising making a living outside of modern social institutions (i.e. raising or gathering food, providing shelter and energy needs, etc.), outside of the occasional week-long wilderness trip. This would, one assumes, demonstrate how the self-in-Self works in practice.

A further point of confusion in the self-within-Self approach, are the statements in some writings of supporters of deep ecology regarding the idea that there are "no boundaries" between individual beings. Fox, for example, writes:

The central insight of deep ecology [i.e. Naess's ecosophy-T - Editor] is the idea that we can make no firm ontological divide...between the human and the non-human realms...[T]o the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness.¹⁸

Such a statement suggests that for Fox to practice deep ecology we must cast away all sense of the egoistic individual and lose ourselves in a great whole. Yet at the same time some, like Naess, stress the need for the individual, and for diversity.¹⁹ Naess steers clear of mysticism precisely because it often leads to the subsuming of the individual to a great whole.²⁰ Devall and Sessions, in the same paragraph where they proclaim that "There are no boundaries and everything is interrelated," also state

But insofar as we perceive things as individual organisms or entities, the insight draws us to respect all human and nonhuman individuals in their own right as parts of the whole without feeling the need to set up hierarchies of species with humans at the top.²¹

Such statements leave readers confused as to deep ecology supporters' intent and have left the deep ecology movement open to criticism, particularly from ecofeminists such as Janet Biehl and Ariel Salleh. Such criticism has led to considerable revising and clarifications on the part of supporters of the deep ecology movement. There seems an unwillingness to admit that the alternative to the rugged "individualist" is not an almost comprehensive denial of that individual. The articulation these deep ecology supporters may be after is too fuzzy; it has little grounding in practical hands-on living. Self-in-Self requires a clearer, not more complicated, definition than deep ecosophic theories present.

The Ecofeminist Worldview

Ecofeminists have also spent considerable time discussing the idea of self. Ecofeminists such as French, King and Leland would agree with supporters of the deep ecology movement that alienation and the separation between human and nature are significant causes of ecological degradation. They are, however, hostile towards the Naess's type of solution of self-within-Self. The hostility is perhaps understandable. As Biehl rather sarcastically notes, when women are asked to become "one" with something, as in traditional marriages, it often means losing their self.²²

A good part of ecofeminist critique seems to stem from confusions that deep ecological theorists themselves have created by not making clear the role of the individual within the larger whole. Subsuming the self to serve the whole is clearly an unpleasant alternative to many women (and other marginalized beings as well) who have not profited from this strategy in the past. Further, such a view can often rationalize and justify horrendous treatments of the individual, so long as the whole is not threatened.²³ Some Deep Ecology supporters, however, often gloss over the importance of the individual in a quest for more permeable individual boundaries. One male ecofeminist, Jim Cheney, identifies this tendency as one peculiar to male theorists. This is, Cheney suggests, because they themselves are uncomfortable with their own strong individuality.²⁴

Cheney, Biehl and Plumwood also identify a more sinister, if unconscious, motive underlying the expansion of self into Self. As Cheney describes it, there is no need to respect the other as a distinct individual if the other is simply absorbed and thereby contained and controlled.²⁵ Plumwood points out that an assumption that the rainforest's needs are our own can lead to an assumption that our needs (such as cheap beef) are also the rainforest's.²⁶ Who is to say that the redwood tree does not wish to serve humanity's needs as a picnic table?

Ecofeminists claim the question is not one of the either/or variety: either the isolated, alienated individual or the self lost in a whole. A more useful variation would be to put the stress onto the relationship between beings, as do Native

Americans.²⁷ To acknowledge the relationship, rather than an impersonal "cosmological" connection, gives back the uniqueness and value of the individual as well as the larger environment. It validates the highly individualistic attachment to lands and beings that are at the basis of Native American worldviews. Unfortunately, there is also considerable legitimacy to the concern articulated by Fox, Biehl and others: personal attachments make a fragile platform on which to base environmental and social changes.²⁸

Ecofeminists, then, are left with a confusing problem. Do they acknowledge and embrace a tendency shared by many women (and men) to see themselves in connection with others through relational ties? If so, how then do they work to ensure that they do not become absorbed by the other, particularly when they are told that "connection" is an ecologically sound state? No clear consensus has really emerged among ecofeminists, although it is quite clear few ecofeminists have much interest in being told by deep ecology theorists to subsume their personal individuality for the greater ecological good.

Conclusions

It clear that both the deep ecology movement and ecological feminism have some way to go to reach a clearer articulation of the identification of self. Ecofeminists are split amongst themselves, but are united in their critique of some of deep ecology supporters. Both ecosophies need to take a more critical look at the problems yet unaddressed in their ideas. While it is impossible to borrow directly from unrelated culture successfully, both the deep ecology movement and ecofeminism might benefit by taking a closer and more careful look at a source both claim as inspirational; indigenous perspectives on the role of self might well suggest new possibilities.

Endnotes

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3. Ibid, p. 192.
4. Peter Matthiessen, 1984, *Indian Country*, New York, NY: The Viking Press, p. 9.
5. Joseph Epes Brown, 1989, "Becoming Part of It," In D.M. Dooling and Paul Jordan Smith (eds.), 1989, *I Become Part of It: Sacred Dimensions in Native American Life*, New York, NY: Parabola Books, Pp. 9-20, p. 20.
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10. Warwick Fox, 1990, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology, Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*, Botson, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.
11. See Martin Buber, 1970, *I and Thou*, New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
12. Fox, *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology*, p. 106.
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14. See for example Warwick Fox's use of the phrase in Fox, *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology*, p. 231.
15. Naess, "Identification as a Source," p. 262.
16. Ibid, P. 261.
17. See Stephanie Romeo, 1985, "Concepts of Nature and Power: Environmental Ethics of the Northern Ute," *Environmental Review* 9(2): 150-170; and Ward Churchill, 1992, *Struggle for the Land*, Toronto, Ontario: Between the

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19., Stephan Bodian, 1982, "Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: A Conversation with Arne Naess," *The Ten Directions* (Summer/Fall): 7, 10-14, P. 11.

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22. Biehl, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology," p. 29.

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24. Jim Cheney, 1987, "Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 9(2): 115-145, P. 120-121.

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