

PHIL 442: Topics in Feminist Theory – Ecofeminism

Term: Fall 2014

Time and place: Tuesday and Thursday 11:35 to 12:55 in Leacock 210

Prerequisite: PHIL 242 and an intermediate course in philosophy (or permission from the instructor)

Credits: Three

Instructor: Doctor Antoine Panaioti

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Office hours: Thursdays 13:00 to 15:00; Leacock 923

I) Course Description

Ecofeminism is a highly diverse branch of feminist theory, united by little more than the conviction that there exists an important relation between the oppression of women under patriarchy and the abuse of nature characteristic of modern, industrialised societies. There is ample disagreement among ecofeminists both as to what exactly this relation may be and as to how bringing it to light should inform feminist praxis. This makes for some confusion in the field. What is more, from the early nineties onward feminist theorists of other persuasions have strongly criticized ecofeminism as counter-productive (as regards the struggle for women's emancipation) by virtue of its purported essentialism, romantic mysticism, or overall naïveté. The label "ecofeminist" itself, at this stage, has become contentious – some feminists hold fast to this appellation, while for others it is a term of abuse. In short, it would appear that the intersection between feminism and environmentalism represents a site of serious tension in contemporary feminist theory.

This fall, PHIL 442 will consist in an in-depth exploration of ecofeminism and of the philosophical issues that crop up around it. The principal (and strongly interlocking) questions that will inform our enquiry include:

Is there a plausible relation between the oppression of women and the abuse of the environment? If so, what type of a relation is it? More specifically, which of these two phenomena, if any, has precedence over the other – is the abuse of nature an outgrowth of the oppression of women, or vice versa, or do they co-arise as twin symptoms of some deeper delusion?

On the assumption that there is a significant relationship between the oppression of women and the abuse of nature, how strong is this relationship? Can any progress be made on one front without combat also being engaged on the other? If so, why be an ecofeminist – wouldn't it be more fruitful judiciously to pick one's battles in a context-sensitive manner? What are the risks of feminism simply getting dissolved into environmentalism, or vice versa?

Is the charge of essentialism levelled against ecofeminism appropriate – does it necessarily restore the arguably patriarchal association of the emotional, community-oriented female with

the “natural”? Is ecofeminism irretrievably steeped in obscurantist and retrograde spiritual mysticism?

Does ecofeminism represent a threat to the struggle for women’s emancipation? Or, on the contrary, is it an essential component of the struggle to end global injustice on the basis of gender?

PHIL 442 will be broken down into four parts. In **Part I – Before Ecofeminism**, we will begin by reading excerpts from such seminal early feminist texts as Friedrich Engel’s *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. The main thrust of Beauvoir’s highly influential existentialist feminism, it will be argued, seems to preclude (pre-emptively?) much of what ecofeminists would put forward in the later decades of the twentieth century. **Part II – The Emergence of Ecofeminism** will explore the rise of ecofeminism by situating it within the broader context in which it emerged. Texts under review will include Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Ester Boserup’s *Women and Economic Development* (1970), and Françoise d’Eaubonne’s *Le féminisme ou la mort* (1974). **Part III – A Survey of Ecofeminist Literature** will be devoted to the writing of such seminal ecofeminist authors as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, Ynestra King, Karen Warren, Greta Gaard, Noël Sturgeon, and Lorraine Code. In **Part IV – Critiques of Ecofeminism**, finally, we will turn to the work of those feminist theorists who have sought to distance themselves from ecofeminism, most prominently Karen Green, Janet Biehl, and Elizabeth Grosz.

II) Course Goals

The purpose of this course is to allow students with a background and abiding interest in feminism to expand and make use of their knowledge through the exploration and critical examination of important developments in feminist theory. The course is also designed to help students develop critical thinking, superior exegetical skills, as well as a greater ability to present analytically rigorous philosophical reconstructions of important ideas, arguments, and theories. Ultimately, students are expected to succeed in composing a 3,500-word carefully structured, and well-argued philosophy paper.

III) Instructional Method

All in all, the course will broadly follow the traditional lecture format. Students are thus expected to prepare for bi-weekly lectures by reading the assigned texts ahead of class. Students are also expected to participate in the class discussions complementing and building upon the lectures. Every lecture, in this connection, will end at least ten minutes prior to the end of the allotted time (i.e. at 12:45 or earlier), allowing for questions, clarifications, observations, objections, and/or debate. During this period, students are encouraged to engage critically not only with the instructor and the course material, but also if not mainly with one another. In a similar vein, lectures will end half-way through the allotted time every two weeks or so to allow for more sustained discussions and debates. On such occasions, a given number of students will be selected randomly to present the concise discussion question/comment (max. 200 words) which all students are required to have prepared ahead of class (these discussion questions/comments

will be collected by the instructor at the end of the discussion period and form part of student's evaluation – see Section IV, below). Student presentations – followed by a discussion period – will also be central to Parts III and IV of the course.

IV) Evaluation

Evaluation for PHIL 442 breaks down as follows:

- A) Attendance (5%) – up to two lectures can be “skipped” at no cost; a third absence will incur a cost of three percentage points; a fourth the forfeiture of your entire attendance grade (note that failure to attend class will also affect your participation grade).
- B) Participation (20%) – 8% of this will be based on your actual participation in class discussions (with due consideration given to observable temperamental differences), the remaining 12% on the discussion questions/comments you will be required to hand in (your three highest-graded questions/comments alone will count toward your final participation grade).
- C) Short Paper (15%) – 1000-word essay, due Tuesday, October 21; essay topics and details forthcoming.
- D) Presentation (15%) – over the course of Parts III and IV of the course, all students are expected to give a 25-minute presentation based on one of the texts assigned on the date of the presentation; details forthcoming.
- E) Final Paper (45%) – 3,500-word essay on the topic of your choice (research questions due November 18); electronic submissions due December 16.

V) Course Material

Electronic versions of assigned texts will be posted by the instructor on PHIL 442 webpage.

VI) (Partial) Course Outline

Introduction

Tuesday, September 2: No reading

Part I: Before Ecofeminism

Thursday, September 4: Engel's *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), pp. 6–44.

Tuesday, September 9: Engel's *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), pp. 86–96; de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), pp. 62–75.

Thursday, September 11: de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), pp. 76–89 & 753–766; FIRST DISCUSSION PERIOD.

Part II – The Emergence of Ecofeminism

Readings to be determined, but very likely to include:

Boserup, Ester (1970). *Women and Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Carson, Rachel (1962). *Silent Spring*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Collins, Sheila (1974). *A Different Heaven and Earth*. Valley Forge: Judson Press.

D'Eaubonne, Françoise (1974). *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Paris: Pierre Horay.

Part III – A Survey of Ecofeminist Literature

Readings to be determined, but very likely to include:

Code, Lorraine (2006). *Ecological Thinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Daly, Mary (1978). *Gyn/ecology*. Beacon Press, Boston.

Gaard, Greta & Lori Gruen (1993). "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health," *Society and Nature* 2: 11–35.

Gaard, Greta (2002). "Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Article," *Frontier: A Journal of Woman Studies* 23(3): 117–146.

Griffin, Susan (1980). *Woman and Nature*. New York: Harper and Row.

King, Ynestra (1989a). "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology," in J. Plant (ed.), *Healing the Wounds*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers: 18–28.

King, Ynestra (1989b). "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and Nature/Culture Dualism," in A. M. Jaggar and S. R. Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstruction of Being and Knowing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 115–41.

Merchant, Carolyn (1982). *Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

— (1996). *Earthcare*. New York: Routledge.

Mies, Maria & Vandana Shiva (1993). *Ecofeminism*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Plumwood, Val (1991). "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Hypatia*, Vol. 6(1), 3–27.

— (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.

— (2002). *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge.

Sturgeon, Noël (1997). *Ecofeminist Natures*. New York: Routledge.

Warren, Karen (1987). "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9: 3–21.

— (1990). "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12: 125–46.

— (ed.) (1994). *Ecological Feminism*. New York: Routledge.

Part IV – Critiques of Ecofeminism

Reading to be determined, but very likely to include:

Biehl, Janet (1991). *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*. Boston: South End Press.

Green, Karen (1994). "Freud, Wollstonecraft and Ecofeminism," *Environmental Ethics* 16: 117–34.

Gaard, Greta (2011) "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism," *Feminist Formations* 23(2): 26–53.

Grosz, Elizabeth (2005). *Time Travels*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

VII) McGill Policy Statements

1. McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures" (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

2. In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.