

# Three Visions Of An Ecological Self

by Jacqueline Pearce \*

Envisioning the possibility of an ecologically appropriate society involves being able to imagine, not just a different way of living, but also a different way of being. Deep ecology, social ecology and ecofeminism are approaches which both critique the current dominant society and attempt to envision how this society might look and behave, given a more ecologically appropriate self-understanding.<sup>1</sup>

"Self," as we understand it today, is a relatively recent concept born with the emergence of humanism in seventeenth century Europe. Before this time, identity was rooted in community and place, and meaning was found in God rather than in individual humans. Today we take for granted notions of individual identity and individual rights. Such concepts would have been meaningless before the seventeenth century. Yet today they underlie Western culture's most basic values and principles.<sup>2</sup>

In developing their visions of an ecological society, deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism all look to our understanding of self as the critical element determining how we live and relate to the world around us. All three recognize the dominant society's definition of self as narrow and limiting. Yet their proposals for a new definition of self involve very different assumptions about what it means to be human and what it means to be in relationship with other species.

While the dominant worldview regards humans as fundamentally different and separate from nature, deep ecologists regard humans to be continuous with the rest of nature and not as superior or more important. Deep ecologist Bill Devall distinguishes between the "minimalist self" whose goal is merely immediate survival, and the "ecological self" whose goal is personal growth through empathy and solidarity with other beings.<sup>3</sup>

For deep ecologists individual maturation and self-realization requires that we not only grow to identify ourselves with other humans, but with the

nonhuman world as well:

Traditionally the **maturity of self** has been considered to develop through three stages, from ego to social self, comprising the ego, and from there to metaphysical self, comprising the social self. But Nature is then largely left out in the conception of this process.<sup>4</sup>

In an attempt to redress the omission of nature from traditional theories of self development, Arne Naess (who originated the term "deep ecology") proposes the concept of "ecological self." An ecological self is expanded beyond the narrow sense of individual ego, because of an identification with others, human and nonhuman. Thus, with growing maturity and growing identification, the self is widened and deepened.<sup>5</sup> Deep ecologists have also explained this growing maturity as "self-realization," involving a realization of both the individual self and the larger Self of which everything is a part.

Australian deep ecologist Warwick Fox suggests "there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms."<sup>6</sup> To suggest that there are no divisions and no boundaries between entities is not to suggest that there are no individuals and no differences. The deep ecology "norms" of self-realization and biocentric equality require that:

all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization within the larger Self-realization.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding that we are unique individuals yet connected to a larger whole, is arrived at mainly through an intuitive or spiritual feeling which many deep ecologists have experienced at some time. Naess recognizes that if one has not had such

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an experience of connection or extended identification, "one is not easily drawn to become involved in deep ecology."<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is perhaps the deep ecology notion of "extended identity" and of no boundaries between humans and nonhuman nature that is most unsettling for, and most often misinterpreted by, critics of deep ecology. Some feminists, for example, feel that the deep ecology notion of extended identity and "no boundaries" ignores women's struggle for autonomy and individuation.<sup>9</sup> They warn that any call to extend identity which does not incorporate a critique of patriarchal culture's association of human identity with the masculine will further negate and subjugate the female self to the male self. This criticism, however, overlooks deep ecology notions of self-realization and diversity, which may potentially have liberating implications for women. As Naess explains:

Self-realization is the realization of the potentialities of life. Organisms that differ from each other in three ways give us less diversity than organisms that differ from each other in one hundred ways. Therefore, the self-realization we experience when we identify with the universe is heightened by an increase in the number of ways in which individuals, societies, and even species and life forms realize themselves. The greater the diversity, then, the greater the self-realization.<sup>10</sup>

Identification "with the universe" does not entail the erasure of individual identity and autonomy. For deep ecology, individuality and connection are not mutually exclusive dualisms. Overcoming the culturally imposed dichotomies between self and other, individual and whole, receptivity and activity, etc. entails a balance, or relationship, between the two "sides" rather than a negation of one by the other.

In contrast to accusations that deep ecology is attempting to wipe out the self, Devall and Sessions claim that deep ecology asks:

What does it mean to be a unique human individual? How can the individual self maintain and increase its uniqueness while also being an inseparable aspect of the whole system wherein there are no sharp breaks between self and the other?<sup>11</sup>

Devall explains that "exploring ecological self is

part of the transforming process required to heal ourselves in the world."<sup>12</sup> This process of healing and developing a "transpersonal self" begins with self-awareness. Devall proposes that growth to a transpersonal self frees us from the need for constraining ethics:

As we discover our ecological self we will joyfully defend and interact with that with which we identify; and instead of imposing environmental ethics on people, we will naturally respect, love, honor and protect that which is our self... No moral exhortation or dogmatic statement of environmental ethics is necessary to show care for other beings--including rivers or mountains--if our self in this broad and deep sense embraces the other being.<sup>13</sup>

For deep ecologists it is from the expanded identification of self with the rest of nature (human and nonhuman) that transformation to an ecological society will flow.

Social ecology also recognizes the importance of the development of the self in the achieving of an ecological society:

We often speak of self-management and self-activity as our ideals for a future society without recognizing often enough that it is not only the "management" and "activity" that has to be democratized; it is also the "self" of each individual--as a unique, creative, and competent being--that has to be fully developed.<sup>14</sup>

Social ecologist Murray Bookchin criticizes the Western mode of perception which "traditionally defines selfhood in antagonistic terms."<sup>15</sup> This definition perceives the self as an ego which is not only distinguished from the external "other," but also "seeks to master these others and to bring them into subjugation." Bookchin suggests that self development entails a recognition of the self as distinct from the "other" (rather than as continuous with, or extended to include the other, as deep ecology suggests). However, this distinction need not require an antagonistic or domineering relationship to the other. Whereas hierarchical society tends to rank differences hierarchically, social ecology values difference as an end in itself. This attitude extends to differences in



nature, between people, and to different potentialities within the individual self.

Bookchin points out that in a hierarchical society, such as our own, severe constraints are put on "each individual's potentiality for consciousness, reason, selfhood, creativity, and the right to assert full control over her or his daily life."<sup>16</sup> Bookchin refers to the "abortion of each individual's potentiality" as a warping of "destiny."<sup>17</sup> He calls for an extension of our notion of freedom "beyond any concept we have held of this notion in the past."<sup>18</sup> In other words, we must not only recognize the unfreedom which results from class hierarchy, we must also recognize the unfreedom which is created by hierarchy and domination in **any** form. To liberate the individual self, every level of experience--personal, political, economic, ecological, etc.--must be freed of domination. In this way, each individual human can be free to discover his or her own potential and pursue her or his own choices: to "manage" his or her own life and act directly upon it.<sup>19</sup> For Bookchin, then, "self-realization" is not achieved through an expanded conception of the self, as in deep ecology, but through an expanded conception of freedom.

Bookchin criticizes the capitalist notion of

individualism, which "does not produce individuals" but competing "atomized egoists."<sup>20</sup> He suggests that the social ecology understanding of individual self-actualization "presupposes existential relations with others of a like kind who are loving and mutually supportive."<sup>21</sup> Individual freedom exists in a social realm, and thus, does not become "privatized hedonism."<sup>22</sup>

While recognizing that the individual is grounded in the human community and in nature, Bookchin feels there is a danger in suggesting a blurring of the boundaries between self and the surrounding context. He suggests that identification with a single universal "Self" leads to passivity and openness to outside manipulation. He suggests that it is only from the perspective of conscious recognition of ourselves as different from nature that we can **choose** to redevelop our connection to nature. Bookchin explains that in his view "humanity had to be expelled from the Garden of Eden to attain the fullness of its humanness."<sup>23</sup> He suggests that, while it was the dissolution of "early humanity's mutual reciprocity with the natural world" that led to today's environmental problems, this dissolution also led to the achievement of a "rich wealth of mind, personality, technical insight, culture, and self-reflective thought." Thus, for Bookchin, humanity's

"separation" from nature was a necessary step in social evolution. To return to the past, or to limit any of the choices open to modern humans (even when the limitation seems based on ecological necessity) would be to impose unfreedom and limit human potentiality:

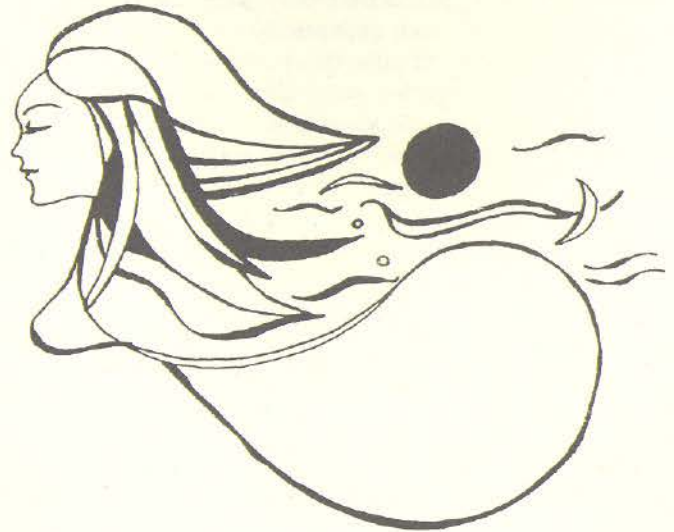
To leave humanity's latent capacity for actualizing the fullness of reason, creativity, freedom, personality and a sophisticated culture only partially or one-sidedly fulfilled is to deny the rich dialectic of the human condition in its full state of realization and even of nature as life rendered self-conscious.<sup>24</sup>

This warning brings out two important aspects of the social ecology definition of self: the notion (already discussed) that self-realization is linked to individual freedom of choice, and the notion that humanity, through the evolution of mind, is "nature rendered self-conscious." The idea that humanity is nature rendered self-conscious is linked to the social ecology understanding of natural evolution. For Bookchin, the goal of natural evolution is the development of increasing complexity and diversity culminating in the development of the human mind:

nature moving in a cumulative thrust toward ever-greater complexity, ever-greater subjectivity, and finally ever-greater mind with a capacity for conceptual thought, symbolic communication of the most sophisticated kind, and self-consciousness in which natural evolution knows itself purposively and wilfully.<sup>25</sup>

For Bookchin, humans are this complex mind, this self-consciousness through which natural evolution knows itself. He suggests that consciousness gives humanity both the ability to wipe out nature's diversity (as we are currently doing) or to nourish it (as we would in an "ecological" society). Thus, social evolution is now capable of joining with natural evolution in the project of creating greater and greater diversity. The self-actualization of nature can then become informed by human consciousness. It is through this active symbiosis that humanity and nature become "reharmonized" for social ecologists, not through any "mystical and passive" merging of the human self with nature.

For ecofeminism, an understanding of the self involves the recognition that in patriarchal culture



the "authentic self" has been defined as male, and the female has been used as the symbol representing what the authentic self must overcome. Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that in the dominant understanding the self is divided into the "masculine" ego and the "feminine" unconscious.<sup>26</sup> The characteristics associated with the ego (initiative, reason, the capacity for autonomy and what our culture has deemed "higher virtues") make up the "authentic" self in our society over and against the qualities of the unconscious self (passivity, sensuality, irrationality and dependency). Ruether traces the development of negative female imagery and its internalization in the split human psyche, and calls for a healing process which takes into account the different healing needs of men and women in Western culture.

Ruether points out the significance of sexual symbolism to an understanding of the construction of self and of the dominant reality in general:

Sexual symbolism is foundational to the perception of order and relationship that has been built up in cultures. The psychic organization of consciousness, the dualistic view of the self and the world, the hierarchical concept of society, the relation of humanity and nature, and of God and creation—all these relationships have been modelled on sexual dualism.<sup>27</sup>

Ruether suggests that originally female symbolism was positive. Societies which interacted daily

with nature and were directly dependent on nature for survival recognized that they were the children of the earth, which was represented by a mother-goddess. However, gradually this positive symbolism was subverted into negative symbolism as the importance of women's role as life-giver and centre of the family-centred economy gave way to the growing power of the male sphere of politics, economics (now pulling away from the home), and the military. At the same time, dependence on nature was also being rejected, and nature too was taking on negative symbolism.

The traditions Western culture eventually inherited were those of patriarchy and dualism. These two traditions came together in the dualistic experience of self and body, and of transcendent plane and material world, which projected the lower half of each dualism onto the sexual other--woman. The repressive view of the alien female is also "the model for the inferiorization of other subjugated groups, lower classes, and conquered races."<sup>28</sup> The "other" is required as the antithesis over which "authentic" (male) selfhood is defined and the position of the male elite is justified.

Thus, in Western culture, Ruether summarizes:

consciousness arose in a one-sided, antagonistic way by making one half of humanity, not the partner in the struggle, but the symbol of the sphere to be transcended and dominated. . . . The psychodynamics of self-knowledge have been spurred by negation of, rather than cooperation with, the "other."<sup>29</sup>

While deep ecology and social ecology recognize the limitations our culture has put on the development of certain human capacities and potentials, ecofeminism points out the crucial role female symbolism and the repression of women has played in this limitation. Thus, in order for self-realization to occur for either sex, women (and that part of the self associated with femaleness and nature) must be freed from negative imagery and subjugation. This does not mean a revalorization of the old mother-nature or goddess symbolism. Woman must cease to be a symbol for anything, positive or negative, and instead each woman must be recognized as an individual containing all the possibilities of personhood.

For ecofeminism, self-realization can not occur without a reconstruction of relationships based on muted conceptions of mutualism and integration:

Women seek a reconstruction of relationships for which we have neither words nor models: a reconstruction which can give each person the fullness of their being stolen from them by false polarization . . . Authentic relationship is not a relation between two half selves, but between whole persons, when suppression and projection cease to distort the encounter. We seek a new concept of relationships between persons, groups, life systems, a relationship which is not competitive or hierarchical but mutually enhancing."<sup>30</sup>

Ruether explains that at this point in our culture the development of wholeness must move in opposite directions for men and for women. While men need to recover their repressed "female" unconscious, women need to nurture their repressed rationality, autonomy, and self-definition.<sup>31</sup> While deep ecology speaks to the dominant definition of (male) self when it calls for a move away from the narrow definition of self as ego, ecofeminism speaks to the muted and undefined female self when it calls for a nurturing of ego and self-definition. When taken together with a recognition of the differing needs of male and female maturing selves, these two calls are complementary (provided they are not interpreted as in opposition). The move to broaden the male self to incorporate the other does not entail the elimination of the ego, while the move to strengthen the female ego does not entail the elimination of connection with the other or with the unconscious. What is required for wholeness is the dissolution of all hierarchical dualisms, and a balance of all human potentialities rather than an emphasis on any one more than another:

Without sex-role stereotyping, sex-personality stereotyping would disappear, allowing for genuine individuation of personality. Instead of being forced into a mold of masculine and feminine "types," each individual could shape a complex whole from the full range of human psychic potential for intellect and feeling, activity and receptivity.<sup>32</sup>

Ruether suggests that a society no longer bent on "conquering the earth" might have more time for "cultivation of interiority, for contemplation, for artistic work that celebrated being for its own

sake.<sup>33</sup> However, she also stresses that this individual interiority would not be cultivated at the expense of the community:

It would be a cultivation of the self that would be at one with an affirmation of others, both our immediate neighbours and all humanity and the earth itself, as the "thou" with whom "I" am in a state of reciprocal interdependence.<sup>34</sup>

Social ecology, deep ecology and ecofeminism all express concern over the limitation and distortion of the self which occurs in the dominant culture. In our hierarchical society certain human potentialities (for experience, thought and feeling) are muted. In the transformations proposed by social ecologists, deep ecologists, and ecofeminists, each individual is theoretically free to choose from the whole continuum of human potentialities. Devall and Sessions suggest a redefinition of the self so that self-understanding and self-realization include not just the individual self but also the extended self-in-nature (with the understanding that the larger Self is made up of a variety of individual selves). In other words, deep ecologists attempt to challenge the humanistic individualized conception of self on which our current way of looking at the world is based (unfortunately, however, the metaphor of extended identity continues to imply that the individual self is the focus of care and identity, since it is only through extending the self that care and identification are extended).

Bookchin limits his definition of self to the human individual, but calls for a new, complementary understanding of the relationships between the individual self and others, including nonhuman nature (he presents no challenge to the ideology of humanism).

Ruether suggests that the potentialities which have been muted in women differ from those which have been muted in men. While men may need to nurture their sense of connection to others, women may need to nurture their sense of self-definition. In general Ruether, like Bookchin, suggests that a new harmony between humanity and nature will come about through a reconstruction of the relationships between humans and nonhuman nature, rather than through a redefinition of the self to include the nonhuman as deep ecology suggests (however, ecofeminist Elizabeth Dodson Gray does explicitly suggest that a larger sense of self is needed which entails a larger self-interest encompassing the non-human world).

All three celebrate the possible uniqueness of human consciousness, but each draws slightly different implications from this uniqueness. Deep ecology, in a sense, draws no implications. In other words, deep ecology celebrates human consciousness and leaves it at that. It does not assume that human consciousness means anything in particular for the rest of nature. Deep ecology assumes a position of humility regarding our ability, as humans, to understand the rest of nature, let alone know what is best for nature. Social ecology, on the other hand, draws the implication that human consciousness can and should work for the rest of nature, and that because humans are "nature rendered selfconscious" they can know what nature wants and needs, and can act more effectively on nature's behalf than can nature itself (humans can rehabilitate damaged ecosystems, for example, more quickly than natural processes). This view advocates one kind of "freedom" for humans and another kind for nonhumans.

Ecofeminism seems to fall more in the middle between deep ecology and social ecology. Ruether criticizes the tendency to elevate consciousness to "supernatural apriority," recognizing that our identity is also gained through embodiment, yet, like Bookchin, she suggests that humans can make nature into a "garden," implying humans have the understanding and moral justification to alter and "improve" nature.<sup>35</sup> While her confidence in human consciousness and its ability to successfully "cultivate" nature is similar to Bookchin's, her description of human consciousness as continuous with the "radical energy of matter throughout the universe"<sup>36</sup> has similarities to the deep ecology conception of continuity between humans and the rest of nature. Like deep ecologists, Ruether recognizes the possibility of experiencing a spiritual continuity with other beings and with nature as a whole.

The visions of self expressed by social ecologists, deep ecologists, and ecofeminists accomplish two things: they point to the limitations of the dominant Western conception of self, and in so doing, they enable us to see possibilities which have been repressed or unrealized in our cultural conceptions of self. Each may have problems and limitations which require critical attention, but their promise lies, not in their specific outlines of potential self, but in their challenge to our current conceptions of self. What emerges from the positions when taken together is a concept of being which affirms the individual self and is at the same time rooted in a context of relationships and interdependence.

## Notes

1. For basic outlines of deep ecology, social ecology and ecofeminism see, for example, "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy for our Time?" by Warwick Fox in *The Ecologist* vol.14 no.5-6, 1984; "The Deep Ecology Movement" by Bill Devall in *Natural Resources Journal* 20:(1980); "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections" by Karen Warren in *Environmental Ethics* 9:1 (1987); "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering" by Charlene Spretnak in *Woman of Power*, Spring 1988; "What is Social Ecology?" (an interview with Murray Bookchin) in *Alternatives* 12:3-4, (1985). In this essay I look mainly to Murray Bookchin as representative of social ecology, Bill Devall, George Sessions and Arne Naess as representative of deep ecology, and Rosemary Radford Ruether as representative of ecofeminism. Although Ruether does not call herself an "ecofeminist" (her book *New Woman New Earth* was written before the term was coined), her ideas are often quoted by ecofeminists, and her exploration of the concept of self is clearly developed.

2. See *The Arrogance of Humanism* by David Ehrenfeld (1978) for an elaboration of the historical emergence of the ideology of humanism. See *Words and Values* by Peggy Rosenthal (1984) for an outline of the historical development of the word "self" from neutral pointer to substantive noun.

3. Devall, Bill, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1988), p. 42.

4. Naess, Arne, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" in *The Trumpeter*, 4:3 (1987), p. 35.

5. Ibid.

6. Devall, Bill and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), p. 66.

7. Ibid., p. 67.

8. Ibid., p. 76.

9. See, for example, "Deeper than Deep Ecology: the Eco-Feminist Connection" by Ariel Kay Salleh in *Environmental Ethics* 6:(1984), and "An Eco-feminist looks at Deep Ecology" by Janet Biehl in *Kick it Over*, Winter (1987) (Biehl's criticism may also be prompted by a socialist's suspicion of the spiritual connotations of "extended identity").

10. Naess quoted in Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, p. 76.

11. Ibid., p. 65.

12. Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends*, p. 42.

13. Ibid., p. 45.

14. Bookchin, Murray, *Towards an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), p. 47.

15. Ibid., p. 265.

16. Ibid., p. 15.

17. Ibid., p. 16.

18. Ibid., p. 15.

19. Ibid., p. 47.

20. Ibid., p. 253.

21. Ibid., p. 262.

22. Bookchin, Murray, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982).

23. Bookchin, *Towards an Ecological Society*, p. 26.

24. Ibid., pp. 24-25.

25. Bookchin, Murray, "Social Ecology vs. Deep Ecology" in *Kick it Over* (Winter 1987), pp. 4a-8a. See p. 8a.

26. Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 4, 157.

27. Ibid., p. 3.

28. Ibid., p. 4.

29. Ibid., pp. 25-26.

30. Ibid., p. 26.

31. Ibid., p. 29.

32. Ibid., p. 210.

33. Ibid., p. 211.

34. Ibid.

35. Ruether, Rosemary Radford, "Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature" in *Healing the Wounds*, Judith Plant, ed. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989) pp. 145-150. See Elizabeth Dodson Gray's *Green Paradise Lost* (1979) for an ecofeminist perspective which is critical of the paternalism and arrogance in suggestions that humans are "stewards" of the earth.

36. Ibid., p. 146.

