

# HUMAN CENTRISM, ANIMIST MATERIALISM, AND THE CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM IN VAL PLUMWOOD'S CRITICAL ECOLOGICAL FEMINISM

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Val Plumwood's critical ecological feminism (CEF) proposes a theorisation of the conceptual and logical foundations underlying the oppressions of women and nature within dominant western philosophical traditions, and a challenge to the dominant rationalist framework of mastery to which these oppressions are attributed. The present paper proposes, firstly, to expound the trajectory and development of CEF through Plumwood's body of work. Secondly, it will defend CEF from objections proposed by John Andrews, including that the critique of dualism fails to prove the moral equality of human and non-human entities which it presupposes, and that its mutuality requirement implies the very hierarchy and exclusion it seeks to overcome. Finally, the paper will address the impact and significance of Plumwood's CEF in light of its foundational challenge to dominant frameworks of reason and logic, and to the methodologies and concerns of mainstream analytic philosophy itself. It will suggest that Plumwood's central thesis is essentially sound and that it is therefore of great significance to the task of reconceptualising human-nature relationships in a more rational, just and prudentially sound manner.

## 1. Val Plumwood's Critical Ecological Feminism

Val Plumwood's Critical Ecological Feminism (CEF) developed out of her late 1970's collaborative work with Richard Sylvan, which pioneered the field of environmental philosophy in Australia. This early work provided an influential critique of human chauvinism within dominant western ethics, and argued the need for an alternative, environmental ethic based on non-instrumental valuation of non-human nature, the demarcation of entities' moral significance by means of non-zoological categorical distinctions, and an ethic of respect for human and non-human others.

Plumwood's development of CEF in the early 1990's reconceptualised the problem of human chauvinism as one of hegemonic centricism, a distorting and oppressive conceptual structure based on a foundational dualist logic, characteristic of dominant, rationalist forms of reason and classical logics. This analysis of

human chauvinism as human centrism- or anthropocentrism- was facilitated and embellished by a parallel critique of the better-theorised logic and politics of androcentrism, a parallel which Plumwood grounded in the shared logical structure of the oppressions of women and nature, and the connection between these groups as historically and culturally inferiorised contrasts to the valourised spheres of men, reason and culture. In developing this parallel critique, Plumwood drew inspiration from Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Dodson Gray and Genevieve Lloyd's analyses of domination within prevailing western philosophical and theological traditions.<sup>1</sup>

Plumwood also drew on her background in non-classical logics to further illuminate the presence, patterns and problematic consequences of dualist logic within dominant rationalist modes of reason, arguing it to be foundational to the interconnected oppressions of not only nature and women, but also of the poor, and of colonised races.

Her proposed solutions to centric oppression and the ecological 'crisis of reason' centred around the development of mutualistic, contextually sensitive interspecies communicative ethics, based on non-dualistic conceptions of alterity and the recognition of both continuities and non-hierarchical differences between dualised contrasts. In order to facilitate the reconceptualisation of humans in ecological terms and non-human nature in ethical and political terms, Plumwood argued for an intentional panpsychist theory of mind, and a broader framework of animist materialism inspired by Indigenous Australian ecological philosophies.

## 2. Human Chauvinism as Hegemonic Centrism

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Dodson Gray, E. 1979, *Green Paradise Lost: Remything Genesis*, Roundtable Press, Wellesley and Massachusetts; Lloyd, G. 1984, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, Methuen, London; Radford Reuther, R. 1975, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, Seabury Press, New York.

Richard Sylvan and Val Plumwood's pioneering 1979 critique of human chauvinism within dominant western ethics defines the concept in relation to class chauvinism, as the “substantially differential, discriminatory and inferior treatment” of the class of non-human entities by members of the class of humans, where this treatment lacks sufficient justification.<sup>2</sup> They contend that insofar as dominant western ethical systems unjustifiably treat humans as uniquely morally significant; fail to provide an account of humans' direct, non-instrumental moral obligations to non-humans; and promote varying degrees of human dominion over non-human nature, these frameworks sanction differential, discriminatory and inferior treatment of non-humans and are by consequence human chauvinist.<sup>3</sup>

Plumwood's development of this collaborative critique of human chauvinism in her early 1990's work, and beyond, draws on feminist analyses of oppression and rationalism as well as insights from liberation theory in order to enrich and expand the analysis of the human mastery of nature.<sup>4</sup> Her critique of the dominant western framework of rationalist reason allows her to draw out the structural features and logical patterns common to various instantiations of oppression, namely the logic of centrism and its foundational value dualisms, and also the role of related instrumental egoist models of selfhood. Thus she is able to provide a more global critique of oppression than that offered by the earlier analysis of human chauvinism, involving not just the problems inherent in the human chauvinist framework's foundational instrumentalist value theory, but also highlighting the broader conceptual and perceptual distortions

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2 Routley, R. and Routley, V. 1979, 'Human Chauvinism and Environmental Ethics', in *Environmental Philosophy*, eds. M. Mannison, M. McRobbie, and R. Routley, Department of Philosophy, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, p.96. See also Routley, R. and Routley, V. 1978, 'Against the Inevitability of Human Chauvinism', in *Ethics and the Problems of the 21st Century*, eds. K. Goodpaster and K. Sayre, Notre Dame University Press, South Bend, Indiana, pp.36-59.

3 *Ibid.*, p.109.

4 See Plumwood, V. 1991, 'Nature, Self and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism', *Hypatia*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 3-27, (reprinted in Warren, K. (ed.) 1996, *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis); Plumwood, V. 1993a, *op cit*; Plumwood, V. 1996a, 'Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics', *Ethics and the Environment*, Vol.1, No. 2, pp.119-152. Reprinted in Warren, K. 1997, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp.327-355.

involved in centric structures and dualist logic, and the injustices and prudential dilemmas they cause in both social and environmental realms.

On Plumwood's analysis, the rationalist conception of the human self is defined in polarised opposition to concepts such as materiality, nature, and necessity, and in accordance with those of reason, consciousness, culture, freedom and transcendence of nature. Together with an emphasis on instrumental and colonising forms of reason, this exclusionary conception provides an important conceptual foundation for the human mastery of nature. Indeed, the logic of the foundational human/nature and reason/nature dualisms which underlie this conception of the human self provide much of the justification and naturalisation for the instrumentalisation of nature, fostering the assignment of exclusive moral significance to humans based largely on their allegedly unique possession of the capacity for reason.<sup>5</sup> This further emphasises their conceptual hyperseparation from non-human nature and permits the instrumental valuation and treatment of the sphere of nature.

The rationalist tradition also holds feminine attributes to be similarly radically separate from human virtue (likewise defined principally in terms of reason), thus creating a "master perspective" which subordinates and is alienated from both the feminine and nature, marrying the concept of reason with power and domination.<sup>6</sup> Given this connection between the subordination of women and that of nature, Plumwood appeals to androcentrism as a more fully theorised parallel model for the human mastery of nature and accordingly reconceptualises human chauvinism in terms of the logic of hegemonic centrism.

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5 Plumwood, V. 1991, *op cit.*, p.162. Plumwood is careful to specify that "it is the essentially or authentically human part of the self, and in that sense the human realm proper, that is outside nature, not the human as a physical phenomenon."

6 Plumwood, V. 1993a, *op cit.*, pp.69-74.

Plumwood defines hegemonic centrism as “a primary-secondary pattern of attribution that sets up one term (the One) as primary or as centre and defines marginal Others as secondary or derivative in relation to it”.<sup>7</sup> This logical structure is founded on that of a value dualism, defined as an exaggerated dichotomy involving the extreme polarisation of contrasting conceptual pairs and their formation in terms of a value hierarchy. Dualised concepts are formed by a relation of power, promoting the treatment of inferiorised concepts as mere means to the ends of the superior relata, which seek to differentiate, dominate and control the inferior relata.<sup>8</sup> In Plumwood's terms, “[d]ualisms are not universal features of human thought, but conceptual responses to and foundations for social domination”.<sup>9</sup>

The five key features of dualism's “logic of domination” are as follows: *Radical exclusion* or *hyperseparation* involves the denial of continuity between dominant and marginalised groups, instead stressing extreme difference and creating a polarised relation which denies any possibility of overlap. Combined with *backgrounding*- the dominant group's denial of its dependency on the marginalised group and rendering of the latter as inessential background- this works to justify and naturalise the superior relata's claim to unique importance and dominance over the radically discontinuous and seemingly inessential inferior relata. *Incorporation* or *relational definition* involves the definition and recognition of the inferior relata solely in relation to (as excluded from) the superior group; this assimilation to the superior relata's identity, needs and ends negates the needs and ends of the inferior relata and results in the latter's inability to impose moral constraints or limitations on the dominant group. Thus, it is subject to *instrumentalisation* and *objectification*: it is further stripped of intrinsic value, ends, and needs by means of the denial of its subjectivity and intentionality, facilitating its treatment as mere means to the ends of the dominant group. The formation of the dualised relata in terms of a moral hierarchy naturalises

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7 Plumwood, V. 2002, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, London, p.101.

8 Plumwood, V. 1991, *op cit.*, p.168.

9 Plumwood, V. 1993b, 'The Politics of Reason : Towards a Feminist Logic', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 71, No. 4, reprinted in 2003, *Representing Reason: Feminist Theory and Logic*, eds. M. Hass and R. Falmagne, Rowman and Littlefield, p.20.

this instrumentalisation, making it seem a normal consequence of their differing degrees of moral significance. The final feature of *homogenisation* or *stereotyping* occurs when differences within the subordinated group are denied, allowing it to be attributed a reductive and stable identity, thus also promoting the treatment of its constituents as interchangeable and replaceable resources for the dominant group.<sup>10</sup>

These five features provide the basis for hegemonic centricism insofar as they promote certain conceptual and perceptual distortions of reality which universalise and naturalise the standpoint of the superior relation as primary or centre, and deny and subordinate the standpoints of inferiorised others as secondary or derivative. Using standpoint theory analysis, Plumwood's reconceptualisation of human chauvinist frameworks locates and dissects these logical characteristics of dualism, and the conceptual and perceptual distortions of reality common to centric structures, as follows.

Radical exclusion is found in the rationalist emphasis on differences between humans and non-human nature, its valorisation of a human rationality conceived as exclusionary of nature, and its minimisation of similarities between the two realms. Homogenisation and stereotyping occur especially in the rationalist denial of consciousness to nature, and its denial of the diversity of mental characteristics found within its many different constituents, facilitating a perception of nature as homogeneous and of its members as interchangeable and replaceable resources. This definition of nature in terms of its lack of human rationality and consciousness means that its identity remains relative to that of the dominant human group, and its difference is marked as deficiency, permitting its inferiorisation. Backgrounding and denial may be observed in the conception of nature as extraneous and inessential background to the foreground of human culture, in the human denial of dependency on the natural environment, and denial

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10 Plumwood, V. 1993a, *op cit.*, pp.48-54, and Plumwood, V. 1993b, *op cit.*, pp.23-30.

of the ethical and political constraints which the unrecognised ends and needs of non-human nature might otherwise place on human behaviour. These features together create an ethical discontinuity between humans and non-human nature which denies nature's value and agency, and thereby promote its instrumentalisation and exploitation for the benefit of humans.<sup>11</sup>

This dualistic logic helps to universalise the human centric standpoint, making invisible and seemingly inevitable the conceptual and perceptual distortions of reality and oppression of non-human nature it enjoins. The alternative standpoints and perspectives of members of the inferiorised class of nature are denied legitimacy and subordinated to that of the class of humans, ultimately becoming invisible once this master standpoint becomes part of the very structure of thought.<sup>12</sup>

Such an anthropocentric framework creates a variety of serious injustices and prudential risks, making it highly ecologically irrational.<sup>13</sup> The hierarchical value prescriptions and epistemic distortions responsible for its biased, reductive conceptualisation of nature strips the non-human natural realm of non-instrumental value, and impedes the fair and impartial treatment of its members. Similarly, anthropocentrism creates distributive injustices by restricting ethical concern to humans, admitting partisan distributive relationships with non-human nature in the forms of commodification and instrumentalisation.

The prudential risks and blindspots created by anthropocentrism are problematic for nature and humans alike and are of especial concern within our current context of radical human dependence on an irreplaceable and increasingly degraded natural environment. These prudential risks are in large part

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11 Plumwood, V. 2002, *op cit.*, pp.106-109.

12 *Ibid.*, pp.98-99.

13 These are discussed in *Ibid.*, pp.114-122.

consequences of the centric structure's promotion of illusory human disembeddedness, self-enclosure and insensitivity to the significance and survival needs of non-human nature:

The logic of centricism naturalises an illusory order in which the centre appears to itself to be disembedded, and this is especially dangerous in contexts where there is real and radical dependency on an Other who is simultaneously weakened by the application of that logic.<sup>14</sup>

Within the context of human-nature relationships, such a logic must inevitably lead to failure, either through the catastrophic extinction of our natural environment and the consequent collapse of our species, or more hopefully by the abandonment and transformation of the human centric framework.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst acknowledging the importance of prudential concerns for the motivation of practical change, Plumwood emphasises the weightier task of acknowledging injustices to non-humans in order to bring about adequate dispositional change. The model of enlightened self-interest implicit in prudentially motivated action is inadequate to this task insofar as it remains within the framework of human centricism. Although it acknowledges the *possibility* of relational interests, it rests on a fundamental equivocation between instrumental and relational forms of concern for others. Indeed it motivates action either by appeal to humans' ultimate self-interest, thus failing to truly acknowledge injustices caused to non-human others, remaining caught within the prudentially risky framework of anthropocentrism, or else it accepts that others' interests count as reasons for action- enabling recognition of injustices- but it does so in a manner which treats the intersection of others' needs with more fully-considered human interests as contingent and transient. Given this analysis, it is clear that environmental concern must be based on a

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14 *Ibid.*, p.120. Italicised in the original.

15 Plumwood, V. 1993a, *op cit.*, p.195.

deeper recognition of injustice, in addition to that of prudence, if it is to overcome illusions of human disembodiedness and self-enclosure and have a genuine and lasting effect.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Responses to Rationalism and Human Centricism: Beyond the Hegemonic Frameworks.**

The solutions to rationalism and human centricism proposed in Plumwood's early collaborative work with Richard Sylvan and in her later critical ecological feminist approach are multiple and varied but share, as a fundamental aim, the attempt to move beyond hegemonic human-centred frameworks towards an alternative, non-instrumentalist environmental philosophy. Sylvan and Plumwood's early critiques of human chauvinism within dominant western ethical systems propose to found their alternative environmental ethic on a semantical theory of "nonjective" intrinsic value, an annular model of moral significance and obligation, and an attitude of respect towards human and non-human others. They argue that dominant ethical systems cannot simply be extended or modified so as to include non-human entities; rather, a change in foundational attitudes and values is required.<sup>17</sup>

Their semantical theory of value is neither subjectivist nor objectivist, instead employing a notion of "nonjective" intrinsic value which is assignable to both humans and non-humans. This is based upon valuers' preference rankings across possible worlds, including worlds in which the valuer does not exist and those in which their interests conflict with the existence or flourishing of the valued entity. Value is here partly derived from valuers' assessments of value, and partly from the valued entity's characteristics themselves. Given that valuers are, moreover, not necessarily human, this "nonjective" value theory allows intrinsic value in non-human entities to be independent of humans, although crucially non-

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16 Plumwood, V. 2002, *op cit.*, p.116.

17 Routley, R. and Routley, V. 1979, *op cit.*, pp.110-115.

detached from a definite but hypothetical valuer.<sup>18</sup> Given an axiological functor whereby betterness is based on transworld relative preference rankings, the deontic predicate corresponding to Sylvan and Plumwood's semantical analyses of value and permittedness bases permissibility upon a transworld relative permittedness relation. Thus, if A is permitted in world b, and world b has criteria for permittedness that are stricter than those of world a, A will be permitted in world a.<sup>19</sup> On this theory, factual criteria can determine preference rankings across worlds, so that environmental consideration may be understood to involve the valuing of worlds which meet particular environmental facts; for instance, the valuing of worlds in which there is preservation of biodiverse ecological systems.<sup>20</sup> On this analysis, environmental and human chauvinist value theories are based on different preference rankings. Sylvan and Plumwood appeal to a model of constrained value optimisation as a basis for making value judgements, allowing weighted consideration of *both* traditional (i.e. human interest based) and environmental values<sup>21</sup>

Their annular model of moral significance is based on non-zoological and morally relevant categorical distinctions between entities. It demarcates preference-holding creatures from a broader class of entities to whom the concepts of well-being and welfare are applicable, and makes further distinctions within these groupings, for instance dividing the class of preference holders into creatures able to enter into contract, rights holders, responsibility-bearers and obligation-holders, allowing attribution of corresponding relevant moral obligations to each nested ring. The model moreover allows moral concern to apply in principle to any non-sentient object having value or disvalue, although with a restricted range of corresponding obligations. Thus this annular model provides a view of moral significance and

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18 *Ibid.*, pp.152-159.

19 *Ibid.*, p.164.

20 *Ibid.*, pp.165-166.

21 *Ibid.*, pp.168-173.

obligation that is neither reducible nor restricted to a single class of privileged entities, let alone a zoologically defined class such as that of humans.<sup>22</sup>

This combination of a 'nonjective' value theory and annular model of moral relevance forms the foundation for an ethic of respect, which recognises intrinsic value in humans and non-humans alike and permits respectful and constrained use of both groups providing that the value, preferences and welfare attributable to them are not unjustifiably harmed. Sylvan and Plumwood draw inspiration from the "respect position" observed in numerous hunter gatherer societies for this model of non-instrumental moral relationship to both humans *and* the non-human natural world. In contrast to non-respect positions such as that of instrumentalist human chauvinism, this position provides a middle ground between the false choice of instrumental use or respectful non-use of non-human entities.<sup>23</sup>

Plumwood's later embellishment of these collaborative efforts similarly upholds the necessity of an alternative, non-human centred ethical framework able to promote virtues of respect, mutuality, and friendship, and modes of dialogical communication with human and non-human others. To this end, Plumwood proposes multiple counter-hegemonic strategies able to disrupt the logic and patterns of domination common to centric structures. She seeks to dismantle the framework of dualist logic by theorising a non-hierarchical concept of difference which resolves the problematic key features of dualism outlined earlier.<sup>24</sup> In response to the problematic rational egoist model of selfhood associated with Liberal Capitalism, she draws on feminist conceptions of relationality which emphasise the self's essential interdependence with others, and the non-accidental relatedness and overlap of its desires and ends with those of others. Combined with the recognition of both continuities and non-hierarchical

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22 Routley, R. and Routley, V. 1978, *op cit.*, pp.55-56; Routley, R. and Routley, V. 1979, *op cit.*, pp.103-108.

23 Routley, R. and Routley, V. 1979, *op cit.*, pp.178-180. On pp.173-174 Sylvan and Plumwood discuss the revision of the western super-ethic's core deontic principle, namely, the 'freedom principle'. On their alternative, environmental ethic this revised deontic principle delimits freedom according to the notion of respectful, constrained use outlined here.

24 Plumwood, V. 1993a, *op cit.*, p.60.

differences between the human self and non-human others, this relational framework provides the basis for an account of the Ecological Self, which is characterised by its non-instrumental relations with non-human nature, and virtues of care and respect for human and earth others.<sup>25</sup>

Plumwood's arguments for non-dualistic, relational models of selfhood and alterity are supported by her account of the formalisation of negation offered by paraconsistent and relevance systems of logic. According to Plumwood's analysis, logical negation within these systems challenges the rationalist tradition's dualistic models of otherness by providing the formal logical foundations for a non-hierarchical conception of difference which avoids the characteristic features of dualism.<sup>26</sup> In this way, relevant negation provides a foundation for an alternative account of reason based on a logic of mutuality rather than mastery. In facilitating the recognition of continuities and non-hierarchical differences between conceptual contrasts, the conception of positive otherness it provides promotes recognition of intrinsic value within the other, and can facilitate dialogical, co-operative and mutualistic relations between self and other.<sup>27</sup>

Contextual narrative and communicative approaches to interspecies ethics can work together with this anti-dualist conception of alterity to assist in dismantling the human/nature dualism by promoting direct dialogical experiences between human and non-human natural entities, and sensitivity to the agency, communicability and intentionality of non-humans, encountered within the context of particularistic interspecies relationships.<sup>28</sup> In thereby promoting sensitivity to the continuities and non-hierarchical differences between the human self and non-human other, these ethical approaches can assist in the

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25 *Ibid.*, pp.154-160.

26 Plumwood, V. 1993b, *op cit.*, pp.35-37; Plumwood, V. 2003, 'Feminism and the Logic of Alterity', *Representing Reason: Feminist Theory and Formal Logic*, eds. M. Hass and R. Falmagne, Rowman and Littlefield, pp.45-70.

27 *loc cit.*

28 Plumwood, V. 1999, 'The Struggle for Environmental Philosophy in Australia', *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, No. 3, pp.166-167; Plumwood, V. 2002, *Op cit.*, especially pp.167-195.

crucial task of reconceptualising humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical and political terms.

A related counter-hegemonic strategy which facilitates this reconceptualisation is found in Plumwood's theorisation of an animist materialism which valorises a revised notion of materialism, emphasising its intentional organisation and reinstating to it a conception of spirit defined as a "certain mode of organisation of a material body".<sup>29</sup> Argues Plumwood, "there is an important sense in which what we need is more materialism, not less, a better awareness of ourselves as materially embodied beings in a material universe in which we are all material (e.g. food) for one another, and also as organised material beings rather than 'mere matter' in its organised state".<sup>30</sup>

As part of this project, Plumwood proposes an intentional panpsychist theory of mind which re-attributes intentionality and agency to a reductively and mechanistically conceived non-human nature, thus facilitating dialogical and negotiation-based interspecies relationships. By holding intentionality to be one of several key criteria of mind, intentional panpsychism promotes the recognition of more "diverse, continuous and graduated" mental qualities within the non-human world than are allowed by the reductive Cartesian equation of mind with consciousness. In doing this, it highlights important continuities between humans and non-human nature, whilst also allowing the recognition of non-hierarchical differences between the diversity of incommensurable markers of intentionality found within

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29 Plumwood, V. 2002, *Op cit.*, p.223. To this end, Plumwood draws inspiration from Indigenous Australian ecological philosophies. See Plumwood, V. 1990, 'Plato and the Bush: Philosophy and the Environment in Australia', *Meanjin*, Vol. 3, pp. 530-535; Plumwood, V. 1999, *op cit.*, pp.171-174. The work of Deborah Bird Rose and several other eco-anthropologists has provided a fascinating reinterpretation of Indigenous animism, inspired in part by Plumwood's analysis. For a discussion of Indigenous Australian philosophical ecology see Rose, Deborah. 1988, 'Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic', *Meanjin*, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 378-387, and 2005, 'An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 294-305.

30 Plumwood, V. 2002, *Op cit.*, p.223.

human and non-human entities.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, intentionality is not intended to provide a criterion of individual moral worth. Rather, Plumwood argues that the ethical significance of the intentional recognition stance lies in its ability to open up possibilities for interspecies relationships, and its ability to indicate the level of human openness to non-human others' potential for intentionality and agency and to the possibility of communicative and ethical relationships with them.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Plumwood argues for a contextually-sensitive biospherical egalitarianism based on non-ranking (i.e. the avoidance or minimisation of ranking, as opposed to equal moral ranking) of over-generalised categories such as zoological groups, emphasising the importance of such a stance to fostering human openness to the potential communicability and agency of individual non-human beings.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. John Andrews on Plumwood's Critique of Dualism: Moral Equality and Mutuality.

John Andrews has objected to Plumwood's critique of dualism on a number of grounds.<sup>34</sup> Although these objections appear *prima facie* plausible, they are founded on misinterpretations of Plumwood's project, and consequently do little to cast doubt on her arguments.

The first objection derives from Andrews' interpretation of the critique of dualism as a critique of the hierarchical ranking of entities according to their perceived moral worth. On his analysis, such a critique implies a commitment to the attribution of moral equality to humans and non-humans which Plumwood's

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31 Plumwood, V. 2002, *Op cit.*, p.178-180. Examples of such markers can include "pheromone-based, sonar-based and pollen-based sensitivities and chemical communication systems", in addition to sentience, consciousness, and teleology. In thus permitting the recognition of markers that are radically different in kind rather than simply different in degree, Plumwood argues that intentional panpsychism can counteract the human centric framework's emphasis on interspecies ranking based on rational meritocracy or degrees of consciousness; see especially p.180. On p.182, Plumwood proposes that greater intentional complexity (such as is arguably attributable to human individuals) does not correlate systematically with greater value; incommensurability of intentional capacities indicates a need for caution where generalised species rankings are proposed on grounds of intentional complexity.

32 *Ibid.*, pp.180-181.

33 *Ibid.*, pp.172-174.

34 Andrews, J. 1996, 'Warren, Plumwood, a Rock and a Snake: Some doubts about Critical Ecological Feminism', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol.13, No.2, pp.141-155.

arguments fail to establish: "In fact, the theory is sometimes presented as if its critique of dualism establishes the illegitimacy of moral hierarchy, and thus the acceptability of the moral equality thesis whereas the truth is that it has merely presupposed it."<sup>35</sup> Andrews interprets Plumwood's arguments for the recognition of continuities and non-hierarchical differences between humans and non-human nature (on the basis of their sharing of intentional properties that are incommensurable insofar as they differ in kind rather than degree) as intended to provide the grounds for their moral equality. Against this, he argues that the continuity criterion is equally compatible with moral hierarchy as with moral equality, since entities may be ranked according to the quantity or complexity of their intentional features. Similarly, the difference criterion fails to guarantee entities equal moral respect, since difference does not in and of itself provide grounds for respect. Thus, the recognition of continuities and difference together fail to establish human and non-human moral equality.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, however, Plumwood's critique of dualism is not a critique of hierarchical ranking *per se*, but rather of the ways in which dualist logic treats dualised relata by means of its five distinct structural features (namely, radical exclusion, backgrounding, relational definition, homogenisation and instrumentalisation), which together create the conceptual and perceptual distortions that justify and naturalise the instrumentalisation of inferiorised concepts.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to this further complex of features, hierarchical ranking is not itself sufficient for oppression, and Plumwood does not object to it as such. Although she argues for a minimisation of ranking in all possible contexts, her objection essentially

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35 *Ibid.*, p.144.

36 *Ibid.*, pp.145-146.

37 Plumwood, V. 1993a, *Op cit*, p.47. Plumwood argues, "...it is ... the way the distinctions have been treated, the further assumptions made about them and the relationship imposed upon the relata which make the relationships in question dualistic ones." Understanding Plumwood's CEF in light of her earlier collaborative work reinforces this reading. As already discussed, Plumwood's critique of dualism and hegemonic centricism is an attempt to develop and deepen the early analysis of human chauvinism. This analysis is itself an objection to the instrumental treatment of nature based on arbitrary and unjustifiable zoological distinctions, which proposes as a solution an annular model of moral relevance based on non-zoological, morally relevant categorical distinctions. Simple hierarchical ranking- where morally relevant, contextually-specific, and congruous with an ethic of respect- is not deemed problematic; it is allowed that not all human and non-human entities have equal moral significance, and that equivalent moral obligations do not apply to each.

targets generalised group rankings that are insensitive to context and to the individuality of constituent entities.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, her arguments for biospherical egalitarianism- which, contra Andrews, are not presupposed by her critique of dualism- explicitly interpret the concept of equality in terms of non-ranking of generalised species groups. She explains equality as follows:

...the concept of equality is expressible both along the axis of sameness and along that of difference. Equality on the axis of the Same yields scalar equality, while equality along the axis of Difference yields the completely different concept of incommensurability or non-ranking. While critics of egalitarianism focus exclusively on the first concept, it is the second concept we need to give expression to what is valid in the idea of interspecies equality... Both ranking as scalar equals and ranking in a simple hierarchy are forms of ranking, and there are a number of contexts where ranking itself is unnecessary and either logically or morally problematic.<sup>39</sup>

Plumwood thus attempts to extend the stance of non-ranking from intra-human ethics- a sphere in which it is widely accepted- to interspecies relational contexts, arguing that in the latter, the incommensurability of entities' intentional capacities makes ranking logically problematic. Moreover, in both contexts, broad categorical ranking distorts the perception of moral value within constituent entities, taking no account of specific contextual or narrative information relevant to each, and is in this way morally problematic. This discussion suggests that Plumwood's critique of dualism is essentially premised on the importance of human openness and sensitivity to the potential intentionality and ethical relational possibilities of non-humans, and the ways in which this can inform interspecies interactions, rather than on a universalised moral equality thesis as conceived by Andrews.

Plumwood's theorisation of a non-hierarchical conception of difference is, as Andrews submits, the centrepiece of her solution to dualism. However, far from being an attempt to ground moral equality, this theorisation directly and specifically addresses the five key features of dualism, seeking to reconceive dualised relata by foregrounding their continuities - to counter radical exclusion and backgrounding - and by recognising their non-hierarchical differences - to counter relational definition, homogenisation and

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38 See for instance Plumwood, V. 2002, *Op cit.*, p.174. Indeed, Plumwood acknowledges that it is neither possible, desirable nor plausible to argue for non-ranking in all contexts.

39 *Ibid.*, p.172. The logical and moral problems inherent in generalised ranking are discussed on p.173.

instrumentalisation.<sup>40</sup> In this way, Plumwood hopes to furnish a conceptual framework which promotes the recognition of the non-human other as- like the human self- “a centre of needs, value and striving on its own account” which demands respect, thereby providing a corrective to the injustices and prudential risks caused by the anthropocentric framework. The concepts of continuity and difference may well fail to establish Andrews' conception of human and non-human moral equality, but given that they are not intended to do so, this can have no bearing on the validity of Plumwood's critique of dualism.

Andrews' second objection is based on Plumwood's complaint that the logic of dualism makes equality and mutuality between dualised contrasts “literally unthinkable”.<sup>41</sup> From this statement, Andrews infers that the thinkability of mutuality and equality is, in Plumwood's view, a key criterion for the adequacy of an alternative environmental ethic. However on Andrews' analysis, CEF's virtue ethic itself does not make possible the equality and mutuality of human and non-human entities. The thinkability of equality criterion is problematic not only for the reason that moral equality is not established by the critique of dualism, but also because CEF's virtue ethic, while based on the recognition of others' intrinsic value, does not establish their *equal* intrinsic value. Nonetheless, Andrews concedes that equality is not *unthinkable* from within the framework of Plumwood's virtue ethic, and in this sense it might be argued to satisfy the thinkability criterion. In this case, however, the ethic will be problematically vague, providing no categorical principle to guide ethical deliberations where individuals' perceptions of intrinsic value conflict.<sup>42</sup>

The thinkability of mutuality criterion is deemed likewise problematic for Plumwood's CEF, since it appears to rule out the potential for virtuous relationships involving care and respect with non-human

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40 See Plumwood, V. 1993a, *Op cit.*, p.60; the quotation that follows is taken from this page. See also pp.66-68 for Plumwood's discussion of the concepts of continuity and difference.

41 Andrews, J. 1996, *Op cit.*, pp.149-150; Plumwood, V. 1993a, *Op cit.*, p.47.

42 Andrews, J. 1996, *Op cit.*, pp.150-151.

natural entities who are unable to enter into reciprocal relationships- for instance, rocks, rivers, trees and mountains, whose moral exclusion CEF is opposed to. While Plumwood illustrates her discussion of mutuality with a scenario in which she and a snake are involved in intersubjective recognition of one another's intentionality, she notes that intersubjectivity is not a necessary condition for mutuality, which simply requires a "dialectical movement to recognise both kinship and difference".<sup>43</sup> Andrews objects, however, that the concept of mutuality implies reciprocity, and since some non-human natural entities are by nature unable to enter into reciprocal relationships, the mutuality criterion results in the exclusion and devaluation of certain non-human natural entities. Thus, it in fact implies the very moral hierarchy and exclusion to which CEF is supposedly opposed.<sup>44</sup>

Andrews' second objection to CEF problematically equates Plumwood's complaint concerning the 'unthinkability' of equality and mutuality from within dualistic frameworks with an over-generalised requirement of their thinkability as a criterion for an adequate alternative ethic. While these concepts are indeed important features of Plumwood's critical anti-dualist framework, her complaint by no means entails that they are sufficient criteria, nor that they need be thinkable or applicable in *all* interspecies relationships and contexts, as Andrews appears to expect. Indeed, Plumwood provides no argument by which the thinkability of mutuality and equality might be interpreted as universalised imperatives; such a position would conflict both with her objection to universalising approaches to ethics, and to her earlier theorisation of an annular model of moral relevance. A sounder interpretation of Plumwood's complaint need only understand it as implying that an adequate alternative conceptual framework to anthropocentrism should, amongst other things, promote openness to the *potentiality* of non-human others as (non-scalar) equals and as *potential* participants in mutual ethical relationships, possibilities that are closed off by the logic of dualism and centrism.

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43 Plumwood, V. 1993a, *Op cit*, p.157.

44 Andrews, J. 1996, *Op cit.*, pp.151-152.

As argued above, moreover, Plumwood's critique of dualism does not presuppose nor attempt to establish the scalar moral equality of human and non-human natural entities. Likewise, CEF's virtue ethic is not motivated by an attempt to bestow on non-human entities equal intrinsic value in this sense, but rather by the importance of recognising their non-instrumental value, needs and ends, and the ethical constraints that these place upon humans by requiring obligations of respect, care and consideration.

Plumwood does acknowledge that virtue ethics cannot alone provide the basis for an environmental ethic, but, in contrast to Andrews' concerns about ethical vagueness, stresses the importance of particularistic and contextually-sensitive approaches. Thus she delineates a pluralistic framework involving numerous highly localised ethical approaches including care, solidarity, friendship, narrative, communicative, ecological and food web ethics, which might together form a kind of 'ethical lattice'. She recognises that this pluralistic framework is not universalisable since it does not yield a complete ethic applicable to all contexts, and proposes instead that the choice of appropriate ethics for given contexts may be facilitated by the development of a discerning ethical sensibility.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, alongside this localised and particularistic approach it *is* possible to discern a core guiding principle which delimits and underpins Plumwood's interspecies ethic: namely, that to any entity to whom our actions 'might make a difference' (that is, to any autonomous intentional system), we have an obligation of respect.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Plumwood's early collaborative theorisation of a semantical theory of non-detached intrinsic value and of a model of constrained value optimisation provides a framework which can guide ethical deliberations in cases of conflict, by giving weighted consideration to conflicting values.

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45 This discussion takes place in Plumwood, V. 2002, *Op cit.*, pp.186-189.

46 See Plumwood, V. 1993a, *Op cit.*, p.210. In note 4, on pp.211-212, Plumwood expands on the concept of respect in relation to instrumentalism as follows: "Instrumentalism implies that there are no constraints imposed by the *telos* of the instrumentalised class, which is subject to 'arbitrary use', that in moral decision-making, the good, welfare, or *telos* of those outside the boundary does not have to be considered except as it contributes to that of those inside it. To respect nature then means at a minimum that it does not count for nothing in the deliberations of ethical, social and political life, and that actions concerning it are not seen as unconstrained except by human interest and human goals. Respect puts the respected item's good or *telos* on the moral agenda; it requires moral consideration. A stronger concept of respect would require that it not only be considered but be considered as significant, and a stronger one still that it be considered as somehow an equal. In practical terms, respect requires careful or respectful use, where there is use, and sometimes no use..."

Plumwood's discussion of mutuality takes place in the context of her analysis of non-instrumental relational and ecological models of selfhood. She proposes that mutuality is founded on the recognition of continuity, relationality and embedment between self and other, and also, crucially, on the recognition of their non-hierarchical differences, permitting a conception of the other as a "distinct [centre] of striving and resistance" who is capable of impacting on the self and being impacted upon, therefore constraining the self's needs and ends.<sup>47</sup> Openness to non-human others as intentional entities permits such mutuality, and mutual interaction can take numerous forms corresponding to entities' different intentional capacities.<sup>48</sup>

An important but subtle distinction may be discerned in this discussion between her ecological conception of mutuality and that of mutual interaction, of which only the latter need entail reciprocity. The concept of mutuality is explained as follows: "As an ecological concept mutuality resists both analysis in terms of an ontology of holistic reduction and analysis in terms of its converse, atomism... the ecological self [based on mutuality] recognises the earth other as a centre of agency or intentionality having its origin in a place like mine in the community of the earth, but as a different centre of agency, which limits mine."<sup>49</sup> On this reading, mutuality is a stance or process of recognition of the other which occurs within the self, and is in this sense non-reciprocal. Thus, for instance, the ecological self might display mutuality insofar as it recognises a mountain as an independent centre of intentionality and agency (that is, as involving a kind of directionality, which Plumwood holds to be an implicitly teleological concept), allowing it to recognise and respect the mountain's differences to itself, and thereby recognise the limits it places on the self's ends and those that the self might place on the directional "unfolding natural process" that constitutes the

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47 *Ibid.*, p.155.

48 In *Ibid.*, note 8, p.213, Plumwood discusses the variety of forms that mutual interaction can take within contexts involving humans, animals, and ecosystems, and the kinds of intentional capacities these require.

49 *Ibid.*, p.159

mountain's intentionality.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the mutualistic ecological self recognises their continuities: both are ecologically embedded entities, and both have (their own forms of) intentional capacities.

On the other hand, Plumwood's conception of mutual interaction does require reciprocity since reciprocity is by definition necessary to interaction, and therefore *it* cannot be applied to all non-human natural entities. But the concept of mutuality per se does not necessarily entail reciprocity; it can simply denote that something is shared or common to two or more entities.<sup>51</sup> Thus, if we accept the distinction implicit in Plumwood's argumentation, we can allow that while mutual interaction would, as per Andrews' objection, be impossible between entities incapable of reciprocity, mutuality conceived as a stance with recognises continuities and differences between the self and non-human other, would not. Contrary to Andrews' objection then, this latter concept *can* facilitate non-instrumental, virtuous relationships involving benevolence, care, respect and solidarity with rocks, rivers, and mountains.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Clearly, Val Plumwood's critical ecological feminism poses a foundational challenge to dominant rationalist frameworks of reason and logic, their conceptions of alterity, and to the methodologies and concerns of mainstream analytic philosophy itself. Despite the radical nature of such a project, there have to date been relatively few published responses to Plumwood's later work from within the field of analytic philosophy. By contrast, her collaborative 1979 critique of human chauvinism within dominant western ethics, which drew heavily on logical discourse and semantic theory, generated significant discussions about the applicability of non-instrumental value theories to non-human nature, and became a founding text for the then newly developing field of environmental philosophy within Australia. The lack of critical

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<sup>50</sup> Plumwood discusses the intentionality of mountains, trees, and forest ecosystems in *Ibid.*, pp.135-136.

<sup>51</sup> As defined by the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, for instance.

engagement with Plumwood's later work belies the value and importance of her project to current social and ecological problems. Indeed, CEF's integration of social and environmental liberation struggles, its establishment of the conceptual foundations for a new theoretical paradigm, and provision of multiple, open-ended strategies for activist practice acts as an important corrective both to highly abstracted, specialised, and disengaged academic philosophical approaches to social and environmental problems and to current ecologically insensitive political, economic, and scientific paradigms. Plumwood's practical and inter-disciplinary approach to philosophy allowed her to furnish, in the form of CEF, a powerful political tool able to link current and prospective liberation struggles and to provide liberatory strategies grounded in critical theoretical analysis. Within the present context of increasingly serious ecological destruction, this political engagement, together with its provision of contextually-sensitive, communicative ethical responses and practical activist strategies, is certainly one of the project's great strengths.

In the final decades of her life, Plumwood defended the political and historical focus and methodology of CEF, and especially her development of a communicative interspecies ethic inspired by indigenous ecological philosophies, and feminist and anti-colonial theory. She argued that mainstream analytic philosophy's narrow focus on abstract arguments concerning the applicability of concepts of intrinsic value and moral considerability to nature could not provide the necessary basis for a new ethic, which instead required rich narrative, particularistic, and contextually sensitive approaches.<sup>52</sup>

Plumwood criticised institutionalised academic philosophy for its disengagement from environmental concerns and excessive abstraction, rationalism and conservatism, arguing that the radical potential it had appeared to hold at the inception of Australian academic environmental philosophy in the 1970s remained

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52 Plumwood, V. 1999, *Op cit.*, pp.164-165.

unfulfilled.<sup>53</sup> As has been seen, her critique of the anthropocentrism of rationalist traditions led her to the conclusion that the “environmental crisis of reason” was first and foremost a problem arising from dominant rationalist, centric and colonising frameworks, and that a solution must therefore involve the adoption of more ecologically rational framework alternatives. Yet because hegemonic centric frameworks naturalise and justify the standpoint of the master subject by means of perceptual and conceptual distortions, demonstrating the validity and value of counter-hegemonic frameworks was not necessarily a simple task.

Nonetheless, the analysis of Plumwood's position explored in this paper indicates that CEF provides an essentially sound critique of the structures which underpin the various instantiations of dualistic oppression, and a plausible proposal for the development of an alternative, critical anti-dualist framework. Plumwood's message therefore warrants our close attention; its dismissal threatens both the potential for interspecies justice, and ultimately the survival of the non-human natural environment on which we and all other species depend. Faced with this choice, it appears vitally important that we acknowledge and accept Plumwood's overarching arguments and begin to challenge anthropocentric frameworks and the further interconnected web of centric oppressions accordingly.

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