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# Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care

DEANE CURTIN

*This paper argues that the language of rights cannot express distinctively ecofeminist insights into the treatment of nonhuman animals and the environment. An alternative is proposed in the form of a politicized ecological ethic of care which can express ecofeminist insights. The paper concludes with consideration of an ecofeminist moral issue: how we choose to understand ourselves morally in relation to what we are willing to count as food. "Contextual moral vegetarianism" represents a response to a politicized ecological ethic of care.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Suddenly the animal rights movement is gaining the attention of the popular press as it never has before. Its hold on the public's attention may be due to the fact that while its proposals are viewed as radical, it responds to what have become core intuitions in our culture about the basic project of moral theory: the establishment of human or natural rights. But as rights are expanded to new domains, particularly as this expansion has begun to interact with feminist conceptions of morality, the question arises whether the language of rights is the best conceptual tool for exploring distinctively feminist insights about ecological ethics.

Ecofeminism is the position that "there are important connections—historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical— between the domination of women and the domination of nature" (Warren 1990, 126). It argues that the patriarchal conceptual framework that has maintained, perpetuated, and justified the oppression of women in Western culture has also, and in similar ways, maintained, perpetuated, and justified the oppression of nonhuman animals and the environment. This paper affirms that perspective but raises questions about the best way to express from an ecofeminist position the moral connection between human and nonhuman animals. Karen Warren has raised the issue of how to express ecofeminist moral insights in beginning to develop "ecofeminism as a feminist and environmental ethic" (Warren 1990, 138). She

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notes that a feminist ethic is pluralist and it may use rights language “in certain contexts and for certain purposes,” but she says, and I agree, that ecofeminism “involves a *shift* from a conception of ethics as primarily a matter of rights, rules, or principles predetermined and applied in specific cases to entities viewed as competitors in the contest of moral standing” to an ethic that “makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust, and appropriate reciprocity-values that presuppose that our relationships to others are central to our understanding of who we are” (Warren 1990, 141 and 143).

I think Warren raises the critical issue. If ecofeminism is going to make good on its claim that there are important conceptual connections between the domination of nature and the domination of women, and furthermore, that since there are these connections, an environmental ethic is incomplete if it does not in some important ways take into account feminist ethical perspectives, the rights model must be examined for whether it is conceptually the best way of expressing ecofeminist insights.

I believe that the language of rights is not the best way of expressing ecofeminist insights and that a better approach can be found in a politicized ethic of care. I shall consider the animal rights project and its conceptual limitations for feminists (and for ecofeminists in particular); I shall then briefly rehearse some of the feminist arguments concerning an alternative ethic of care; finally, I shall extend a politicized version of that ethic to an ecologically based feminist ethic for the treatment of animals. Here, I shall be particularly interested in the way feminism and ecology are connected through our relations to what we are willing to count as food.<sup>1</sup>

## II. FEMINISM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

Though some ecofeminists, such as Carol J. Adams and Marti Kheel, are committed to animal rights, I am not clear from reading their works precisely what they think the connection is between ecofeminism and a rights perspective. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* Adams says, “Not only is animal rights the theory and vegetarianism the practice, but feminism is the theory and vegetarianism is part of the practice” (Adams 1989, 167). Yet, despite Adams’s repeated connection of animal rights with a feminist practice that includes moral vegetarianism, careful inspection of these references leaves me in doubt about which of two interpretations to give the text. She could mean, minimally, that animal rights activists and feminist activists should see themselves as allies working to resist connected forms of oppression. On this reading, Adams would be working to establish a *practical* connection between feminism and the animal rights movement as a political strategy of coalition building. However, Adams’s text is also consistent with the stronger interpretation, that ecofeminist moral practice is best elucidated *conceptually*

by reference to the philosophical tradition of rights and obligations. The claim made by this latter interpretation is what I question.

A similar lack of specificity concerning whether ecofeminist goals are practical or conceptual can be found in Marti Kheel's work. As founder of *Feminists for Animal Rights*, she has worked to put ecofeminist thought into practice. But conceptually, it seems to me, her work is not best understood as emerging from the rights tradition. In "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair," for example, Kheel criticizes Tom Regan, the best-known advocate of the philosophical view that animals have rights. Her criticisms are distinctively feminist for reasons I shall elucidate below.<sup>2</sup> The question arises, then, whether the feminist insights she brings to ecological ethics are best expressed as issues of animal rights.

My concern in addressing the conceptual issue is exclusively with two quite different views that have gone under the label of rights-based ethics. I make no claim within the context of this paper that these two alternatives exhaust the possibilities for rights-based ethics. My more limited point is to choose the two approaches that have played the most central role in the animal rights literature and argue that they cannot be understood as expressing distinctively feminist insights. The first, which has not proven very sympathetic to the interests of animals, I call the "exchange-value alternative." The second, which has been regarded as more promising, I call the "cross-species identity alternative."

A version of the exchange-value alternative has been defended by Alan White. A right, he says, "is something which can be said to be exercised, earned, enjoyed, or given, which can be claimed, demanded, asserted, insisted on, secured, waived, or surrendered. . . . A right is related to and contrasted with a duty, an obligation, a privilege, a power, a liability" (White 1989, 120). To be capable of having a right, he argues, is to be a subject capable of being spoken about in "the full language of rights." It follows, according to White, that only persons can have rights because only persons can be spoken about in the full language of rights. Infants, the unborn, the comatose are still persons, or potential persons, so "they are logically possible subjects of rights to whom the full language of rights can significantly, however falsely, be used" (White 1989, 120). By contrast, White contends, nonhuman animals cannot exercise a right, nor can they recognize a correlative obligation (White 1989, 121).

Jan Narveson has put the case against extending rights to animals bluntly. He insists that we recognize the rights of other beings only in contexts where we stand to gain from such recognition in the long run, and we observe rights relationships only with those who are capable of entering into and keeping an agreement. "Humans," he says, "have nothing generally to gain by voluntarily refraining from (for instance) killing animals or 'treating them as mere means' " (Narveson 1989, 193), nor are animals capable of making and sustaining agreements.

If we judge whether rights should be extended to new conceptual domains on the basis of considerations suggested by Narveson, nonhuman animals are left out of the picture. Animals, in this view, are to be used according to the self-interest of human beings. If there are any moral strictures on the treatment of animals, they are based on whether certain practices offend the moral sensibilities of those who do possess rights. Nonhuman animals possess no rights themselves.

The second approach to rights depends not on exchange value but on the cross-species identity of some rights-making characteristic. James Rachels's procedure depends on selecting clear cases in which humans can be said to have rights. He then asks whether there are relevant differences between humans and other animals that would justify refusing to ascribe the right possessed by the human to the nonhuman. If no difference is found, the right is said to be possessed by all animals that are identical in that respect, not just humans.

In some cases, Rachels finds that there are relevant differences. A right to exercise freedom of religion cannot be extended to other animals; the right to liberty can be. He asserts, "The central sense of Freedom is that in which a being is free when he or she is able to do as he or she pleases without being subject to external constraints on his or her actions" (Rachels 1989, 125). This definition of liberty based on doing whatever one wishes without external constraints applies across species. The caged tiger in the zoo is not free; the tiger in the "wild" is.

In a similar vein, Tom Regan has argued that "inherent value . . . belongs equally to those who are the experiencing subjects of a life" (Regan 1989, 112). He emphasizes that this is a theory about the inherent value of "individuals" and that "reason-not sentiment, not emotion-reason compels us to recognize the equal inherent value of these animals and, with this, their equal right to be treated with respect" (Regan 1989, 113).

Both of these approaches to animal ethics (particularly the cross-species identity approach since that has been regarded as the more likely alternative) make a number of assumptions that can be challenged if one's goal is to provide an ecofeminist ethic. My intention is not so much to make these arguments here as to rehearse positions that have been argued for elsewhere as a means of placing the present discussion in context.

First, it can be argued that views such as Rachels's and Regan's are too narrow to express feminist insights<sup>3</sup> because they allow us to recognize only those rights-making characteristics that nonhuman animals have in virtue of being in some way *identical* to humans. Rachels has granted, for example, that by his procedure of establishing animal rights on the basis of whether nonhuman animals are like humans, we are theoretically denied access to rights that other animals may possess uniquely (Rachels 1989, 124). (In fact, I am not sure what one could do to elucidate what this claim *means* given that we cannot, in

principle, know what the criteria for such rights would be.) Rachels's procedure recognizes only identity of interests, not diversity. Similarly, Regan's criterion for possession of inherent value picks out a common denominator in virtue of which humans and nonhumans are identical. But many of the interests an ecological ethic may have rest precisely on the differences between humans and other animals.

The assumption that moral status depends on identity of interests has been challenged by some feminists.<sup>4</sup> A feminist ethic tends to be pluralistic in its intention to recognize heterogeneous moral interests. It sees the attempt to reduce moral claims to identity of interests as one strand in a moral fabric that has tended to exclude women's voices. If ecofeminism is to make the claim that there are important conceptual connections between ecology and feminism, it should question whether a feminist ecological ethic is best expressed through the extension of rights to nonhuman animals on the basis of their partial identity to human beings.

The second concern about the conceptual compatibility of ecofeminism with the rights approach is that the rights approach to treatment of animals is formalistic. It is committed to the idea that equal treatment based on a criterion of cross-species identity is the central concept of morality where this is defined as treatment that is neutral with respect to context. It recommends a decision procedure by which those beings that have rights can be separated from those that do not. Its aspirations are universalistic. Feminist approaches to ethics, however, tend to be not only pluralistic but contextual.<sup>5</sup> They tend to be based on actual interests in the narrative context of lived experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Third, the rights approach is inherently adversarial. As Joel Feinberg has said, "To have a right is to have a claim *to* something *against* someone" (Feinberg 1980, 139). Though conflict certainly may arise in contexts of a feminist understanding of morality, it does not begin from a theoretical assumption of conflict. Rather, a feminist understanding is more likely to be based in a pluralistic context that is dialogical and seeks mutual accommodation of interests (see Benhabib 1987, section 4).

Fourth, connected to a dialogical understanding of ethics, feminist moral thought tends to reconceptualize personhood as relational rather than autonomous (see Ferguson 1989 and Lugones 1987). Whereas the rights approach requires a concept of personhood that is individualistic enough to defend the sphere in which the moral agent is autonomous, feminist approaches to ethics tend to see moral inquiry as an ongoing process through which persons are defined contextually and relationally.

Fifth, whereas the rights approach has tended to argue that ethical judgments are objective and rational and do not depend on affective aspects of experience, this has been questioned by feminist critics partly on the grounds that the conception of the purely rational is a myth, and partly on the grounds that this myth has tended to marginalize the experiences of women by

portraying them as personal rather than moral (Jaggar 1989, 139-43). Following the work of Carol Gilligan, many feminists suggest that an ethic of care is better able to express the connection between reason and feeling found in women's moral discourse.

Finally, as a result of the emphasis on the rational in traditional moral theory, feminist insights concerning the body as moral agent have been missed. But as some feminist philosophers have argued (see Bordo 1989), the identification of woman with body has been one pretext on which women's lives have been marginalized.

These six considerations suggest, then, that the rights approach as applied to the treatment of animals is not a very promising route for establishing a feminist ecological ethic. There may be contexts in which it would be helpful for feminists to present the case for moral treatment of animals in terms of rights. However, I would argue that there is nothing distinctively feminist about this approach. If one accepts that there is a deep ideological connection between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women in Western culture, one must look to a distinctively feminist understanding of oppression.

I do not regard these six points as criticisms of Adams and Kheel. It fact, it would not be difficult to find passages in their works that implicitly or explicitly support what I have said here. Rather, my goal is to encourage a distinction between practical and conceptual alliances and to suggest that Adams's and Kheel's works are better understood conceptually in terms of an ethic of care.

### III. A POLITICIZED ETHIC OF CARING FOR

A source for much of the feminist literature on women's psychological and moral development is Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the rights approach tends to emphasize identity of moral interests, formalistic decision procedures, an adversarial understanding of moral discourse, personhood as autonomous, and a valorization of the nonbodily, Gilligan's research indicates that women's moral experiences are better understood in terms of recognition of a plurality of moral interests, contextual decision making, nonadversarial accommodation of diverse interests, personhood as relational, and the body as moral agent. Furthermore, an ethic of care has an intuitive appeal from the standpoint of ecological ethics. Whether or not nonhuman animals have rights, we certainly can and do care for them. This includes cases where we regularly experience care in return, as in a relationship to a pet, as well as cases where there is no reciprocity, as in the case of working to preserve natural habitats. It even seems possible to say we can care for nonsentient beings. Karen Warren has written about two attitudes one can bring to mountain climbing. One seeks to dominate and conquer the mountain; the other seeks to "climb respectfully with the rock." One can care for the rock partly *because*

it is “independent and seemingly indifferent to my presence” (Warren 1990, 135).

While an ethic of care does have an intuitive appeal, without further development into a political dimension Gilligan’s research may be turned against feminist and ecofeminist objectives. First, if not politicized, an ethic of care can be used to privatize the moral interests of women. In contrast to the rights model, which seeks to cordon off “my” territory over which I have control, the caring-for model may often suggest that the interests of others should, in certain contexts, come before one’s own, and that knowing what to do in a particular situation requires empathetic projection into another’s life. Putting the other in front of oneself can easily be abused. The wife who selflessly cares for her husband who cares only about himself is only too well known.

In a society that oppresses women, it does no good to suggest that women should go on selflessly providing care if social structures make it all too easy to abuse that care. The injunction to care must be understood as part of a radical political agenda that allows for development of contexts in which caring for can be nonabusive. It claims that the relational sense of self, the willingness to empathetically enter into the world of others and care for them, can be expanded and developed as part of a political agenda so that it may include those outside the already established circle of caring for. Its goal is not just to make a “private” ethic public but to help undercut the public/private distinction.

Second, an ethic of care that is not politicized can be *localized in scope*, thereby blunting its political impact. Caring for resists the claim that morality depends on a criterion of universalizability, and insists that it depends on special, contextual relationships. This might be taken to mean that we should care for the homeless only if our daughter or son happens to be homeless. Or, it might mean that persons in dominant countries should feel no need to care for persons in dominated countries. Or, it might mean that we should care only for those of the same species.

As part of a feminist political agenda, however, caring for can remain contextualized while being expanded on the basis of feminist political insights. To take a political example, one of the sources of the oppression of women in countries like India is that deforestation has a disproportionate effect on women whose responsibilities usually include food preparation. A common sight in these countries is village women walking farther every year in search of safe water and fuel for food preparation. In such contexts, the destruction of the environment is a source of women’s oppression.<sup>8</sup> The point here is not that there is a single cause of women’s oppression or even that in countries like India women’s oppression is always ecologically based. Clearly, there are problems like the euphemistically termed “kitchen accident” in which women are burned to death by husbands who are disappointed with the dowry. I am

arguing that in the mosaic of problems that constitute women's oppression in a particular context, no complete account can be given that does not make reference to the connection between women and the environment. Caring for women in such a context includes caring for their environment. A distinctively feminist understanding of community development in countries like India may, then, provide a common context of related (though not identical!) interests that would connect women in the United States with women and the environment in India.

A distinction can be drawn between caring *about* and caring *for* that helps clarify how caring can be expanded as part of a political agenda. Caring about is a generalized form of care that may have specifiable recipients, but it occurs in a context where direct relatedness to specific others is missing. For example, feminist perspectives may lead one to a sense of connection between oneself and the plight of women in oppressed countries. But if one has not experienced the condition of women in India, for example, and more than that, if one has not experienced the particular conditions of women in a specific village in a specific region of India, caring remains a generalized caring about. As an element in a feminist political agenda, such caring about may lead to the kinds of actions that bring one into the kind of deep relatedness that can be described as caring for: caring for particular persons in the context of their histories.

Similar comments may be made about classic environmental issues. By reading about the controversy surrounding logging of old-growth forests, one might come to care about them. But caring for is marked by an understanding of and appreciation for a particular context in which one participates. One may, for example, come to understand the issue partly in terms of particular trees one has become accustomed to looking for on a favorite hike, trees that one would miss given changes in logging regulations. With these political and ecological considerations in mind, I conclude that an ethic of care can be expanded as part of a feminist political agenda without losing its distinctive contextual character. It can resist privatization and localization, retaining the contextualized character that is distinctive of caring for.

A third possible problem with a politicized ethic of care is the contention, argued for notably by Nel Noddings, that caring for can only be elucidated conceptually through the idea of reciprocity. If this is correct, it would be difficult to extend a politicized version of caring for to contexts of community development or to nonhuman animals where reciprocity is either inappropriate or impossible. Noddings argues that "the caring relation . . . requires . . . a form of *responsiveness* or *reciprocity* on the part of the cared-for" to be a complete act of caring for (Noddings 1984, 150). Though she notes some cases where this may occur with nonhuman animals, she doubts in general whether our relations with animals do reach such a stage of completion in reciprocity. She doubts, therefore, whether we can really be said to care for nonhuman animals.

I find Noddings's requirement of reciprocity unconvincing. Reciprocity is important in certain contexts of caring for-those Noddings takes as her principal examples, such as caring education—because in those contexts we are looking for a response which indicates that caring has had the desired effect. But I regard these as special cases that become dangerous to feminist moral interests if generalized. Many of the contexts of caring for that an ecofeminist might be especially interested in are precisely those in which reciprocity cannot be expected. It seems quite possible that a feminist political consciousness may lead one to care for women in a Dalit village in India, and to work to relieve the oppressive consequences for their lives resulting from the destruction of the environment. But it would be dangerous to suggest that such caring for requires reciprocity. Is it really caring for if something is expected in return? What would be appropriate in return? We ought to distinguish the *contextualization* of caring for (the requirement that all caring for has a determinant recipient) from the *localization* of caring for, which resists the expansion of caring for to the oppressed who are geographically remote from us, or to nonhuman nature. A distinctive mark of caring for is that in some contexts it is expressed “selflessly.”

In summary, ecofeminist philosophy seeks not only to understand the condition of women but also to use that understanding to liberate women and nature from the structures of oppression. In achieving a new sense of relatedness of the kind that feminist and ecofeminist political philosophy can provide, one is enabled to enter into caring for relationships that were not available earlier. One may come to see, for example, that the white, middle-class American woman's typical situation is connected with—though not identical to—the condition of women in oppressed countries. Caring for can also be generated by coming to see that one's life (unknowingly) has been a cause of the oppression of others. The caring-for model does not require that those recipients of our care must be “equal” to us. Neither does it assume they are not equal. It is based on developing the capacity to care, not the criterion of equality. The resultant caring for may lead to a new sense of empowerment based on cultivating the willingness to act to empower ourselves and others.

#### IV. CONTEXTUAL MORAL VEGETARIANISM<sup>9</sup>

In this section I provide an example of a distinctively ecofeminist moral concern: our relations to what we are willing to count as food. Vegetarianism has been defended as a moral obligation that results from rights that nonhuman animals have in virtue of being sentient beings (Regan 1983, 330-53). However, a distinctively ecofeminist defense of moral vegetarianism is better expressed as a core concept in an ecofeminist ethic of care. One clear way of distinguishing the two approaches is that whereas the rights approach is not inherently contextual<sup>10</sup> (it is the response to the rights of all sentient beings),

the caring-for approach responds to particular contexts and histories. It recognizes that the reasons for moral vegetarianism may differ by locale, by gender, as well as by class.

Moral vegetarianism is a fruitful issue for ecofeminists to explore in developing an ecological ethics because in judging the adequacy of an ethic by reference to its understanding of food one draws attention to precisely those aspects of daily experience that have often been regarded as “beneath” the interest of philosophy. Plato’s remark in the *Gorgias* is typical of the dismissive attitude philosophers have usually had toward food. Pastry cooking, he says, is like rhetoric: both are mere “knacks” or “routines” designed to appeal to our bodily instincts rather than our intellects (Plato 1961, 245).

Plato’s dismissive remark also points to something that feminists need to take very seriously, namely, that a distinctively feminist ethic, as Susan Bordo and others argue, should include the body as moral agent. Here too the experiences of women in patriarchal cultures are especially valuable because women, more than men, experience the effects of culturally sanctioned oppressive attitudes toward the appropriate shape of the body. Susan Bordo has argued that anorexia nervosa is a “psychopathology” made possible by Cartesian attitudes toward the body at a popular level. Anorexics typically feel alienation from their bodies and the hunger “it” feels. Bordo quotes one woman as saying she ate because “my stomach wanted it”; another dreamed of being “without a body”. Anorexics want to achieve “absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh” (Bordo 1988, 94 and 95; also see Chernin 1981). These attitudes toward the body have served to distort the deep sense in which human beings are embodied creatures; they have therefore further distorted our being as animals. To be a person, as distinct from an “animal,” is to be disembodied.

This dynamic is vividly exposed by Carol Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Adams 1989, part 1). There are important connections through food between the oppression of women and the oppression of nonhuman animals. Typical of the wealth of evidence she presents are the following: the connection of women and animals through pornographic representations of women as “meat” ready to be carved up, for example in “snuff” films; the fact that language masks our true relationship with animals, making them “absent referents” by giving meat words positive connotations (“That’s a meaty question”; “Where’s the beef?”) while disparaging nonflesh foods (“Don’t watch so much TV! You’ll turn into a vegetable”); men, athletes and soldiers in particular, are associated with red meat and activity (“To have muscle you need to eat muscle”), whereas women are associated with vegetables and passivity (“ladies’ luncheons” typically offer dainty sandwiches with no red meat).

As a “contextual moral vegetarian,” I cannot refer to an absolute moral rule that prohibits meat eating under all circumstances. There may be some

contexts in which another response is appropriate. Though I am committed to moral vegetarianism, I cannot say that I would never kill an animal for food. Would I not kill an animal to provide food for my son if he were starving? Would I not generally prefer the death of a bear to the death of a loved one? I am sure I would. The point of a contextualist ethic is that one need not treat all interests equally as if one had no relationship to any of the parties.

Beyond personal contextual relations, geographical contexts may sometimes be relevant. The *Ihalmiut*, for example, whose frigid domain makes the growing of food impossible, do not have the option of vegetarian cuisine. The economy of their food practices, however, and their tradition of “thanking” the deer for giving its life are reflective of a serious, focused, compassionate attitude toward the “gift” of a meal.

In some cultures violence against nonhuman life is ritualized in such a way that one is present to the reality of one’s food. The Japanese have a Shinto ceremony that pays respect to the insects that are killed during rice planting. Tibetans, who as Buddhists have not generally been drawn to vegetarianism, nevertheless give their own bodies back to the animals in an ultimate act of thanks by having their corpses hacked into pieces as food for the birds.<sup>11</sup> Cultures such as these have ways of expressing spiritually the idea “we are what we eat,” even if they are not vegetarian.

If there is any context, on the other hand, in which moral vegetarianism is completely compelling as an expression of an ecological ethic of care, it is for economically well-off persons in technologically advanced countries. First, these are persons who have a choice of what food they want to eat; they have a choice of what they will count as food. Morality and ontology are closely connected here. It is one thing to inflict pain on animals when geography offers no other choice. But in the case of killing animals for human consumption where there is a choice, this practice inflicts pain that is completely unnecessary and avoidable. The injunction to care, considered as an issue of moral and political development, should be understood to include the injunction to eliminate needless suffering wherever possible, and particularly the suffering of those whose suffering is conceptually connected to one’s own. It should be understood as an injunction that includes the imperative to rethink what it means to be a person connected with the imperative to rethink the status of nonhuman animals. An ecofeminist perspective emphasizes that one’s body is oneself, and that by inflicting violence needlessly, one’s bodily self becomes a context for violence. One becomes violent by taking part in violent food practices. The ontological implication of a feminist ethic of care is that nonhuman animals should no longer count as food.

Second, most of the meat and dairy products in these countries do not come from mom-and-pop farms with little red barns. Factory farms are responsible for most of the 6 billion animals killed for food every year in the United States (Adams 1989, 6). It is curious that steroids are considered dangerous for

athletes, but animals that have been genetically engineered and chemically induced to grow faster and come to market sooner are considered to be an entirely different issue. One would have to be hardened to know the conditions factory-farm animals live in and not feel disgust concerning their treatment.<sup>12</sup>

Third, much of the effect of the eating practices of persons in industrialized countries is felt in oppressed countries. Land owned by the wealthy that was once used to grow inexpensive crops for local people has been converted to the production of expensive products (beef) for export. Increased trade of food products with these countries is consistently the cause of increased starvation. In cultures where food preparation is primarily understood as women's work, starvation is primarily a women's issue. Food expresses who we are politically just as much as bodily. One need not be aware of the fact that one's food practices oppress others in order to be an oppressor.

From a woman's perspective, in particular, it makes sense to ask whether one should become a vegan, a vegetarian who, in addition to refraining from meat and fish, also refrains from eating eggs and dairy products. Since the consumption of eggs and milk have in common that they exploit the reproductive capacities of the female, vegetarianism is not a gender neutral issue.<sup>13</sup> To *choose one's diet* in a patriarchal culture is one way of politicizing an ethic of care. It marks a daily, bodily commitment to resist ideological pressures to conform to patriarchal standards, and to establishing contexts in which caring for can be nonabusive.

Just as there are gender-specific reasons for women's commitment to vegetarianism, for men in a patriarchal society moral vegetarianism can mark the decision to stand in solidarity with women. It also indicates a determination to resist ideological pressures to become a "real man." Real people do not need to eat "real food," as the American Beef Council would have us believe.

## V. CONCLUSION

An ethic of care provides a very important beginning for an ecofeminist ethic, but it runs the risk of having its own aims turned against it unless it is regarded as part of a distinctively feminist political agenda that consciously attempts to expand the circle of caring for. Ecofeminism is in a position to accomplish this expansion by insisting that the oppression of women, the oppression of the environment, and the oppressive treatment of nonhuman animals are deeply linked. As a kind of feminism it can emphasize that personhood is embodied, and that through the food which becomes our bodies, we are engaged in food practices that reflect who we are. Ecofeminism is also in a position to offer a politicized ethic that promises liberation from the forms of oppression that link women and the environment.

## NOTES

I wish to express my appreciation to Lisa Heldke for many fruitful conversations, particularly on the topics addressed in section IV. Karen Warren and two anonymous readers for *Hypatia* provided comments that substantially improved this paper.

1. In attempting to work out a conception of morality that is consistent with ecofeminism, I am conscious of speaking as a man about the experiences of women. I do not intend to speak *for* women, but as a man who believes men as well as women can learn from the testimony of women's experiences. I believe, for example, that men can learn something important about what it means to be a person by listening to women speak about anorexia nervosa. This is not meant to deny that there are important gender differences in the ways women and men experience food.

2. For example, she doubts the claim that moral prescriptions must be universalizable and that they must issue from reason alone. Ethics for her must include a dimension of care (see Kheel 1985).

3. Feminist insights into ethics are those that can be seen as arising from and expressing the conditions of women's moral lives. While there is a broad range of views that have been advanced by feminist ethicists, there are also patterns of agreement. In what follows I am suggesting that these patterns of agreement are sufficiently well developed to call into question the conceptual link between ecofeminist ethics and the language of rights.

4. See Marilyn Frye (1983, 66-72), for the distinction between arrogant and loving perception; María Lugones (1987) on the distinction between unity, which erases difference, and solidarity, which recognizes difference; and Seyla Benhabib (1987, 91) who describes the rights approach as "monological" in its inability to recognize the moral "other."

5. Iris Marion Young connects deontological theories with what Adorno called the "logic of identity," which "eliminate[s] otherness" by denying "the irreducible specificity of situations and the difference among moral subjects" (Young 1987, 61).

6. Not all feminists would agree that a feminist ethics should be inherently contextual. Susan Moller Okin has argued recently that the rights perspective can include both the requirement of universalizability and empathetic concern for others. She proposes that the rights approach can be contextualized; thus she doubts whether there is a "different voice" in morality. I question whether she has succeeded in showing this, however, since her suggestion that the rights perspective requires us "to think from the point of view of everybody, of every 'concrete other' whom one might turn out to be" still entails "*equal concern for others*" (Okin 1990, 32 and 34; italics added). This is still not fully compatible with the care perspective, which allows that a particular context of caring may include caring that is *unequal*. Even if contextualized, a rule-based ethic still proceeds by finding cross-situational identity. There is a difference between contextualizing a rule-governed theory, and a "theory" that is inherently contextualized. I therefore tend to side with those who argue that there is a distinctively feminist ethic of care that cannot be reduced to the justice perspective.

In fact, I would be sympathetic to a position that is even more pluralistic than the alternatives of rights or care. Charles Taylor (1982, 133) argues that there are moral perspectives based on personal integrity, perfection, and liberation. These may not be reducible either to rights or care. I would suggest that an ecofeminist ethics of care is most appropriately developed in dialogue with what Taylor calls the liberation orientation rather than the rights orientation. I intend to do this by arguing in the next section that the care perspective needs to be politicized.

7. See Kittay and Meyers (1987) and Sunstein (1990) for useful collections of papers illustrating the influence of Gilligan's research. Owen Flanagan and Kathryn Jackson (1990) give a helpful overview of the large body of literature on this subject. They point out several changes that might be helpful to Gilligan's theory. For example, whereas she depicts the alternative between a rights perspective and a care perspective in terms of a gestalt shift, Flanagan and Jackson argue that this does not accurately represent the shift that occurs between the two perspectives. A gestalt shift, such as the duck-rabbit, only allows the image to be seen as either a duck or a rabbit. But research suggests that most people can see a particular moral situation from the perspective of either rights or care but that one of these perspectives is regarded as more important, and the distinction in importance tends to be gender based, women emphasizing care, men emphasizing rights (38-40). This suggests the two perspectives are psychologically, not inherently, mutually exclusive, although one may find contexts in which the perspectives do conflict.

8. An excellent source is Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive*. See particularly her account of the Chipko movement (1988, 67-77) which began when women in the Himalayan foothills literally hugged trees that were sacred to them to spare them from deforestation. The movement has grown into a full-scale human development project.

9. By this term, I intend to indicate a distinction between vegetarianism based on considerations of health and vegetarianism based on moral considerations.

10. Regan calls the animal's right not to be killed a *prima facie* right that may be overridden. Nevertheless, his theory is not *inherently* contextualized.

11. This practice is also ecologically sound since it saves the enormous expense of firewood for cremation.

12. See John Robbins (1987). It should be noted that in response to such knowledge some reflective nonvegetarians commit to eating range-grown chickens but not those grown in factory farms.

13. I owe this point to a conversation with Colman McCarthy.

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