

Book Review

Review of *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, by Val Plumwood. Routledge, 2002, 291 pp.

Review by Sherilyn MacGregor

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From Ecological Crisis to Environmental Culture

In the spring of 2001, there was an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the north of England. The UK government, desperate to control the crisis and stop the spread, forced farmers to round up their mostly healthy animals, shoot them one by one, burn their corpses and then bulldoze them into open pits. Supervised by the Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and assisted by the military, 6.5 million animals from 10,000 farms were slaughtered over a six month period. From the window by the desk where I sit, black smoke from the pyres could have been seen wafting over the lush green hills of the Lake District. While I am grateful that I was not living in England when this tragedy occurred, being here now and listening to stories of people who lived through it has been a powerful catalyst for thinking about the kind of logic that might underpin, and be used to justify, such a tragic event.

In her latest book, Australian environmental and ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood offers an analytic framework useful for understanding why events like these make perfect sense in a culture that has no place for the "soft" and emotional sphere of ethics in the hard-nosed world of economic decision-making. In a culture that systematically commodifies animals and the rest of nature (note the conflation of food and environment, with no mention of animals, in the

above-named UK department), it is only *rational* that a government should deem it necessary to sacrifice the lives of millions of healthy animals for the sake of an industrial sector upon which the national economy depends. Perhaps it is the entrenchment of the dominant understanding of rationality that made it possible for the extermination program to be carried out. Viewed through Plumwood's framework, however, the event in question may have been rational in the hegemonic sense of the term (as rational decisions are made with the head not the heart) but it was utterly irrational in ecological terms.

Plumwood's central argument is that the environmental crisis is best understood as a *crisis of reason*, the inevitable product of a culture that has been led by a misguided understanding of reason and rationality. It is the corresponding failure to situate human society ecologically and to think about the non-human world in an ethical way that must be overcome. What we need, she aims to show, is to replace the now dominant forms of instrumental rationality with ecological rationality as part of a larger project of creating an environmental culture. An important step in this process is to repair the dualistic separation of male-coded rationalism and prudence and female-coded emotion and ethics. Such reworking would entail the rejection of "monological, hierarchical, and mechanistic models" in favour of "more mutual, communicative and responsive ones" (12) that would lead ultimately to ethical interspecies partnerships and a critical solidarity with nature.

In the first two chapters of the book, Plumwood presents a thoroughgoing critique of what she calls the "sado-dispassionate" culture of rationalism in the west, complete with a standard listing of eco-crimes committed in its name. She argues that dangerous forms of "ecological denial" pervade most spheres of contemporary life. The most dangerous of these denials is the denial of the embodied nature of human beings, which has brought with it the denial of human dependency on others (human and non-human) and on biophysical processes. It is a central insight of ecofeminism that the masculinist myth of independence and the celebration of the uniquely rational human mind have brought with them the devaluation of all things associated with the feminine and the body. Like the unpaid and underpaid life-sustaining work of women and colonized people, the contributions of the natural world to human existence is externalized in dominant political-economic-technoscientific systems. What is externalized is assumed-yet-denied; that which is objectified and hidden requires neither protection nor moral consideration. Plumwood first presented this analysis in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993). Here she expands it to fit both new globalizing contexts and her heightened philosophical interest in questions of rationality.

Unlike some in the feminist and ecology movements, Plumwood does not give up on rationality, indeed she sees great merit in the concept. Although in accepted definitions of rationality (i.e., instrumental rationality) something is considered rational if the best means are used to achieve the desired ends, this does not mean that the ends are themselves rational. The desired ends could be insane, says Plumwood, and, looking around at the mess made in the name of economic rationality, they most certainly are. It is not rationality as a concept that is to blame but rather the way it has been used by an elite group of individuals in the quest for profit and power. Their quest has been facilitated by a system that keeps them remote from and oblivious to the consequences of their actions. Free trade is effectively free of responsibility; the global market is an ethics-free zone. Global capitalism is extremely ecologically irrational because its *raison d'être* is to use up and contaminate the material conditions of its own existence. "If the world of nature dies, Wall Street dies too" (236). In contrast, the kinds of reason and rationality that Plumwood wishes to restore and put "at the service of liberation" (14) are those that are careful and critical, responsible and ethical. She believes that such reorientation would make possible the two historic tasks necessary for the creation of an *environmental culture*: (re)situating humans in ecological terms and (re)casting the non-human world in ethical terms. Whereas the contemporary global capitalist-imperialist-masculinist-speciesist culture is in the process of destroying life on earth, an environmental culture would be ecologically rational in that it would make *survival* possible.

The first task involves accepting that, as embodied and ecological beings, humans are dependent on nature. If we recognize ourselves to be "dependent rational animals" (I'll quote Alistair McIntyre here even if Plumwood does not) then we will make the kind of choices that are compatible with the needs of biological systems that support us. Drawing on John Dryzek's concept of ecological rationality, Plumwood argues that we need to develop the kind of self-critical reason that allows us to see the lack of fit between our survival aims and the choices and actions that are sanctioned in western civilization. It will then no longer be possible to stand aside and accept that some groups in society are able to purchase comfortable remoteness while others are forced to live with the effects of their environmental and social irresponsibility. Here Plumwood draws on the growing environmental justice literature to highlight the connections between social inequality and ecological irrationality occasioned by, among other things, the geographical distancing of the perpetrators of eco-harms from their physical effects. For example, consumers in the affluent north can enjoy

commodities extracted from southern rainforests while remaining remote from the forest fires, soil erosion, and diseases that are inevitable externalities of the industry. The foot and mouth crisis was (mis)handled by bureaucrats in London while powerless and traumatized farming families struggled to follow their orders in Cumbria. Plumwood claims that the way to bring about an end to the “epistemic remoteness” of the privileged is to move toward a form of deliberative or communicative democracy where everyone has an equal opportunity to speak. But this highly idealized, ecological interpretation of democracy—shared by a growing number of environmental thinkers—lacks concrete suggestions for how such a system might be established, let alone how it might work in practice. I am left wondering: how would more people around the decision-making table have changed the fate of the sheep? Although Plumwood wants to regard animals as communicative beings, she says little about how they ought to be included in an ecological democracy, let alone what ought to happen when the interests of human and non-human are in conflict.

The second task, recasting the non-human world in ethical terms, is where Plumwood provides her most interesting recommendations for eco-cultural transformation. She wants us to adopt what she calls “partnership ethics” that fundamentally change the kind of relations human beings have with the more-than-human world. Plumwood sets this vision apart from other eco-philosophical perspectives that have purported to extend ethical consideration to the non-human. She wishes to avoid the mistakes they have made. For her, the point is not to *extend* the boundaries of ethical considerability but to open up dialogical spaces in which to create ethical and egalitarian interspecies communication. She quite rightly points out that none of the existing approaches (i.e., Kantian, Utilitarian, and Rights-based environmental ethics and deep ecology) has succeeded in developing the kind of non-instrumental, non-anthropocentric ethic that is needed because they fail to think of nature as an agent in its own right. They are thus unable to think in terms of an equal *partnership with nature*.

Although some have characterized her as being a critic of deep ecology, Plumwood gives credit where credit is due in this book and offers some constructive criticisms that build on its strengths. She commends Arne Naess and his followers for providing an activist-inspired account of environmental ethics that moves away from conventional forms of extensionism and instrumentalism and towards a greater sense of solidarity with, even reverence for, nature. Yet she takes issue with deep ecology for giving ethical consideration to the entire non-human world on the basis of human identification with nature in a way that effectively denies it its uniqueness and independence as an agent. What

she calls “environmental unity” approaches to ethics are problematically apolitical in so far as they cover over diversity and leave no room for a separate identity for nature. Here she makes a distinctively feminist critique of the Lockean concept of property to make the point that unity accounts are a form of “coverture” similar to the way women have been treated in marriage. According to Plumwood, this vision of unity is another, albeit subtle, form of anthropocentrism: it equates nature’s interests with those of human beings rather than describing a negotiated relationship between two separate-yet-equal-and-interdependent partners.

It is impossible to think of the more-than-human world as a partner if at the same time we treat aspects of it as commodities. Plumwood makes this point in order to problematize the tendency in deep ecological approaches to say more about the need for changes in individual consciousness than the necessity for institutional changes, especially to the capitalist economy. What she calls for instead is an *eco-socialist deep ecology*, which radically challenges the concept of private property (214). With respect to treating animals as a commodity (i.e., as meat)—which is at the heart of the foot and mouth crisis—Plumwood would replace an animal-rights stance with one based in human kinship with beings who have mind, intention, and communicative abilities that at the same time transcends the human/nature dualism by recognizing that all living things (human beings included) are food for other living things. Thus, the total abstention from consuming animals is not the only possible ethical response (she comes close to calling it unnatural) and it will not succeed in challenging the dominant rationalist economic system. Neither, Plumwood argues, will personal conversion to ethical veganism or vegetarianism, adopted by many deep ecologists, lead to the kind of political alliances (e.g., between farmers, consumers, and animal-rights and anti-capitalist activists) that will be able to confront the systemic causes of animal exploitation and suffering. What is needed, she says, is an end to the hyper-separation of reason and emotion, use and respect, meat animal from pet animal—those moral dualisms that make factory farming acceptable in most places in the world.

Plumwood’s critical analysis of the ecological crisis of reason cuts through many debates in environmental thought and helps to make theoretical sense of some of our most dire ecological problems. I can recommend it as important reading for all those interested in how environmental philosophy might respond to contemporary issues of globalization and enduring injustice. However, I read the book with the horrific foot-and-mouth disease tragedy at the forefront of my mind and so, in spite of her commendable theorizing, I am left wondering how

her proposed move toward partnership ethics helps us to imagine a different way of handling that particular crisis. It somehow seems unsatisfactory to say that in an environmental culture based on a respectful and communicative relationship between humans, animals, and the rest of the non-human world, such a crisis would never have occurred in the first place. How will we get there and what should we do in the meantime? Her call to rethink farming as a non-commodity activity based on inter-species equity is unlikely to make sense to many farmers. I suspect that if we were to apply Plumwood's partnership ethics to the real situation of the Cumbrian farmers (marginalized in an economy desperate to globalize) who had to kill all the sheep and cattle (with whom their families have had a relationship for generations) on their land (much of which is common property), we would find that it not only is founded on some unhelpful generalizations about "western culture" but also that it is unable to address the myriad conflicts and complications that it entailed. I think the book is important contribution to environmental philosophy, but for a philosophical treatise to be able to inspire cultural change it needs to show how it can help us make better choices on the ground and in the field, here and now.