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Ecofeminism Meets Business: A Comparison of Ecofeminist, Corporate, and Free Market Ideologies

Chris Crittenden

ABSTRACT. This paper develops a psychological and ethical ecofeminist position and then compares ecofeminism to corporate and free market capitalism in terms of effects along four scales of well-being: democracy/human rights, environmental health, psychological health, and cruelty toward animals. Using aspects of symbolic interactionism and Antony Weston's self-validating reduction model, it is demonstrated that an ecofeminist belief system tends to promote moral and psychological health whereas the discussed forms of capitalistic thinking militate in the other direction. Ecofeminism is not, however, incompatible with all forms of capitalism, and toward the end of supporting this thesis the rudiments of an ecofeminist capitalism are provided, a capitalism radically divergent from traditional forms yet nevertheless respectful of certain key principles.

Being the most powerful creatures on the planet, we humans should carefully consider our beliefs for the simple reason that the way in which we think transforms the world. Our mores, paradigms, worldviews – call them what you will – translate into behaviors that in turn modify the environment. In the age of corporate capitalism, where transnational corporations dwarf the power of many countries to resist their presence, expropriation of capital, and concomitant

exploitation of natural resources, it becomes urgent to examine the beliefs that underlie the activities of business to determine if they are best for us and our planet. The discipline of business ethics offers a burgeoning selection of theories and moral/psychological orientations challenging the dominant economic mentality. Such challenges run the gamut from social contract and stakeholder theory to Buddhist and feminist philosophies positing the need for a radical restructuring of our institutions of commerce. It isn't a question of whether we will adopt a system of beliefs with moral connotations; the crucial question is which system of beliefs we will adopt and what the resultant earthshaking effects will be. Practically speaking, skeptical and nihilistic concerns pose a red-herring; we must have a constellation of beliefs, a worldview, and the exigent task at hand is to bring ourselves into harmony with that set of beliefs which leads out of the current environmental sickness into a salutary state.

This essay starts by demonstrating the power of ideas to shape the world, a power that is easy to overlook and not fully appreciate. The belief systems of corporate and free market capitalism are then compared with an ecofeminist perspective according to four measures of well-being for human society and Earth: environmental health, psychological health, democracy/human rights, and lack of cruelty toward animals. The central thesis is that the two forms of capitalism have a deleterious influence along these scales, and that ecofeminism, pushing in the positive direction, offers a preferable alternative to the current mindset. The last part of the essay discusses

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methods of implementing an ecofeminist capitalism, a form of capitalism radically different from that currently practiced yet still supportive of certain key principles.

I. The Power of Belief

A rigorous definition of what constitutes a belief or a belief system would bog the discussion in lapidary considerations not appropriate here. By belief systems I mean such things as theories, religious views, concepts of humanity and self, and philosophies that may or may not be rationally grounded by the individuals who possess them. Belief systems can comprise a worldview and there is a drive among many people to attain consistency between beliefs that occur within such overarching frameworks (Mehan and Wood, 1994, p. 314).

The power of beliefs to affect reality is a central claim of symbolic interactionism, a well-entrenched subfield of social psychology. One of many models employed by symbolic interactionism and other disciplines is that of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Studies have shown that beliefs not grounded in fact can, through conscious or unconscious behavior, bring about the expected results (Watzlawick, 1994, p. 360). Antony Weston develops the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy into an environmental modification theory he calls self-validating reduction. After showing that sexist and racist attitudes can “deeply and fundamentally” change individuals of the targeted group such that they conform to the expected stereotypical behavior, he says:

At work here is a specific kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: a self-fulfilling prophecy in which one of the main effects of the “prophecy” is to *reduce* someone (or . . . something) in the world – to make that person or thing less than they or it are or could be, to diminish some part of the world’s richness and depth and promise – and in which this reduction in turn feeds back not only to justify the original “prophecy” but also to perpetuate it [emphasis in original]. (Weston, 1996, p. 117)

What we have here is a “feedback loop” where

an attitude or belief, transmitting through behavior, results in a change in some aspect of the world, a person or environment for example. This harmful reduction validates the initial attitude, and the strengthened attitude leads to more behaviors that bring about more harmful change (or maintain the changes established). In this fashion, unhealthy attitudes can become more and more entrenched and conditions spiral downward toward a truly wretched state.

In addition to the effects of racism on blacks and sexism on women, Weston discusses the effects of self-validating reduction on animals and the land. In the former case, factory-farming attitudes, and those of a complacent public that considers animals inferior and mainly sources of food, have reduced certain domestic species “to the barest shadows of what they might be and once were.” In the second case, concerning the reduction of the land, Weston says the “commercial, anthropocentric view”

is hardly just a “view.” In most places it is *true*. The land has been divided and consumed in accordance with it. And I mean that it is “true” quite literally, just as it may have been true quite literally that the inmates of the concentration camps were reduced to something less than human. It is not just that the land *seems* dead. The reduction is real. The land *is* dead, for example, when a parking lot replaces a woodland. Or it is radically degraded when chemical-intensive monocultures replace the old mixed-community farms . . . So much of the land is now boring, simple, homogenous, “all the same” – so we have *made* it [emphasis in original]. (p. 117)

These examples illustrate the power of beliefs to modify reality; in a large sense the fate of the planet Earth and its elements – the land, the animals, humans themselves – depends on what beliefs the overlord forces of humanity adopt. Undeniably the ideology of corporate capitalism is one of the driving forces of the momentous changes currently reworking humanity into a global monoculture and vigorously transforming bioregions. Later, the differences between free market and corporate capitalism are discussed, but for now note the common foundation shared by both:

- (A) *Humans as insatiable egocentric consumers.* Humans have insatiable wants for the type of goods and services that can be provided by the market. This is an essential and primary characteristic of human nature that cannot be ignored economically or civilly. Most humans, at least, are fundamentally selfish in being competitive and mainly concerned to satisfy their own material and hedonistic desires as manifested “primarily through the quest for financial gain.”
- (B) *The good society maximizes human satisfaction.* In light of the fundamental human nature expressed in (A), the good society provides as many goods and services as possible to satisfy the bottomless consumer. Toward this end of efficient productivity, labor, skills, and “natural resources” should not be wasted; “that is, employed so as to yield less than they might yield in human satisfactions.”
- (C) *Egocentric economic activity is anthropocentrically optimal.* “The action that yields the greatest financial return to the individual or firm is the one that is most beneficial to society.” (Korten, 1996, p. 185) In other words, the Smithian principle of the invisible hand: if self-interested agents compete selfishly in the market, they are “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of [their] intention” – i.e. the good of the whole community (Smith, 1776, p. 423).

Before discussing these beliefs in conjunction with ecofeminism, I conclude this section with four points that inform the following discussion.

First, as noted, beliefs or constellations of beliefs hold enormous power to impact reality, yet this capability is not a *carte blanche* power to usher in physical manifestations of any belief system but rather the power to ignore certain potentials and cultivate others such that the world is sculpted to conform to human values (sometimes irrevocably, as in the current global extirpation of approximately 3 species an hour (Foster, 1994, p. 24)). I adduce the field of symbolic interactionism, the psychological model of the

self-fulfilling prophecy, and Weston’s theory of self-validating reduction to support this claim.

Secondly, given the above considerations it would be insufficient, toward the end of arguing for a certain worldview, to reason in the fashion of verification by empirical observation of the current state of affairs. It would, for instance, be philosophically weak to say, “Look how selfish people are; this is strong evidence for Hobbes’ dictum *homo homini lupus*.” The observed selfishness might be the result of a self-validating reduction set in motion by the very belief that people are selfish, quite plausible considering that advertising companies bombard us constantly, spending \$400 per capita a year, with persuasive works of creative genius motivating insecurity, sybaritic consumption, and lack of concern for our proximate neighbors, let alone persons outside our socioeconomic community (Durning, 1994, pp. 482–489).

Third, beliefs do not occur in a vacuum. They occur in human psyches, which means they intertwine with psychological states: emotions, sentiments, mechanisms that regulate the interaction of the conscious/unconscious realms, and other dynamics of personality. For instance, a belief that white people are superior to black people can fuel a hatred for blacks, especially if they are perceived as causing trouble or trying to extend their influence beyond their ‘proper’ sphere. This link between beliefs and psychology will be elaborated below in conjunction with the discussion of the psychological aspects of ecofeminism.

Lastly, Weston concentrates on the power of self-fulfilling prophecies to do harm, yet he also briefly discusses what might be called self-validating expansion, a cycle that operates in the other direction to actualize or restore some part of the world’s richness, depth, and promise. In this day and age of fierce reductions, we need to not only practice nonmaleficence but also initiate a process of healing. The adoption of a belief structure lending itself to self-validating expansion would greatly facilitate such a regeneration. I propose that ecofeminism is a viable candidate for the type of worldview we need to embrace.

II. Ecofeminism

It is not in line with the purpose of this essay to give a comprehensive account of the various forms of ecofeminism. I offer a brief sketch of the theory and describe several points particularly relevant to the practices of business. In the fifth section of the essay, I suggest ways in which the philosophy expressed below can be integrated into a capitalist system.

The ecofeminist view focuses on the oppression of women and nature, asserting that these oppressions are linked by an unhealthy mindset that perpetuates and (wrongly) justifies such harm. Altering the unhealthy mindset will work toward ending both oppressions, but neither sexism nor naturism can be eradicated without eradicating the other (this is not a metaphysical claim about all possible worlds but rather a contextual claim about late 20th-century society). Although the emphasis is on the oppression of women and nature, ecofeminists extend their theory to cover all oppressions; racism, homophobia, speciesism, and other 'isms' are thought to be linked by the pathology of the dominant paradigms. For example, a considerable amount of ecofeminist scholarship has been devoted to studying the connection between the wrongs inflicted on women and animals, and vegetarianism is considered morally mandatory by many ecofeminists.

The components of the unhealthy mindset challenged by ecofeminism include at least the following:

Domination. This involves looking at the world in hyperbolic terms of superior/inferior such that those viewed as superior are morally allowed to subordinate the interests of those individuals or groups considered inferior to their own. Karen Warren describes this phenomenon as a "logic of domination," and argues that it is an unhealthy way of looking at our relationships with fellow human beings, animals, and nature (1996, p. 19). Furthermore it is morally degenerate, relying on thrasymachian (might makes right) reasoning and other faulty standards of justice (e.g. white makes right, male makes right, etc.).

Objectification. This is the tendency to see those outside one's empathic reach as lacking significant feelings, thoughts, or other attributes that qualify one for moral respect. Objectification can range from mild insensitivity to the extreme callousness witnessed in the torturous exploitation of animals for the purpose of satisfying frivolous needs.

Dissociation. This is the psychological creation of certain dichotomous dualisms (human/nature, man/woman, rationality/emotion, european/african, etc.) that separate the self from emotional connections to others and thus lay fertile soil for the growth of domination and objectification. Dualisms that fracture the self are also possible (good me/bad me, professional me/private me, emotional me/logical me, etc.) and this can lead to *compartmentalization*, a diversity of personas that lack consistency and integration. Severe compartmentalizing leads to a balkanization of the psyche and a restriction on the ability of a person to consciously contact their feelings or beliefs (Metzner, 1995, p. 63).

In addition to highlighting these elements of the unhealthy mindset, ecofeminism asserts various claims as part of an acceptable framework for right living and moral decision-making (Warren, 1996, p. 30):

- (1) *Anti-oppression.* Anything that "promotes sexism, racism, classism, or any other 'isms' of social domination" cannot become part of an ecofeminist ethic.
- (2) *Inclusiveness.* The voices of oppressed peoples (and the communications of animals) should be given just due and fully represented in the moral decision-making process.
- (3) *Highlight neglected values.* "A feminist ethic provides a central place for values typically unnoticed, underplayed, or misrepresented in traditional ethics, e.g., values of care, love, friendship, and appropriate trust." The emphasis on the rational at the expense of the affective is exchanged for a more balanced approach to moral problems.
- (4) *Relational sense of self.* One sees oneself "in

terms of networks or webs of historical and concrete relationships” instead of as an isolated individual competing with or manipulating discrete others.

- (5) *Anti-objective*. An ecofeminist ethic “makes no attempt to provide an ‘objective’ point of view, since it assumes that in contemporary culture there really is no such view.” The moral agent retains a personalized concrete vantage and does not attempt to detach and thereby achieve an “archimedean point” or related orientation.
- (6) *Pluralism*. Moral values and situations are incommensurable, nonreducible to comparable quantities, and approachable from a variety of theoretical perspectives, none of which is ultimately best; each elucidates one facet of the multifaceted complexity of real-life ethical dilemmas.
- (7) *Ecocentrism*. The nonhuman community is seen as having noninstrumental value and worthy of respect in its own right. Moral agents should be neither egocentric (striving to maximize their own consumption) nor anthropocentric (striving to maximize human consumption) but rather aware that protecting and fostering diversity and vibrancy in ecosystems and bioregions is right and virtuous.¹

These various points indicate that ecofeminism is in large part a pluralistic virtue ethic including certain belief structures and requiring an appropriate level of psychological openness. The various normative theories – utilitarian, deontological, social contract, stakeholder, etc. – are utilized within the framework of a healthy way-of-being, where a way-of-being includes certain belief systems and a psychological profile. I endeavor to further clarify and explain this ecofeminist way-of-being in section four, where it is compared to free market and corporate capitalism.²

III. Free market vs corporate capitalism

A brief word is necessary on the difference between free market and corporate capitalism because my critique, though largely applicable to both, does not apply equally. Corporate capitalism, the dominant form, is not free market capitalism, despite the fact that the free market version could be said to include points (A)–(C) above (i.e., humans as insatiable egocentric consumers; the good society maximizes human material satisfaction; egocentric economic activity is anthropocentrically optimal). Free market ideology, however, remaining close to the ideals of Adam Smith, includes elements not honored by corporations, such as:

- (D) *The mobility of labor*. According to Smith, workers should be able to circulate such that competition between employers for labor helps keep wages and employee treatment satisfactory.
- (E) *Capital immobility/domestic bias*. Smith assumes that “capital would be rooted in a particular place” and that domestic commerce would be preferred to foreign. The health of the local economy would be maintained by employers using their profits locally to stimulate business and productivity.
- (F) *Minimal government intervention*. In Smith’s free market, government enforces contracts and protects basic rights but does not favor one business over another by providing special rights, subsidies, protective polices, etc.
- (G) *Owner involvement in management*. “Adam Smith . . . believed that, for the market to function efficiently, those who own the assets must be directly involved in their management. This conclusion was based on the observation that owners exercise greater diligence in ensuring the most efficient use of assets than do managers who do not have an ownership stake.”
- (H) *A level playing field or free market*. Smith envisioned a society like his own in which commerce was carried out by small local companies competing on roughly equal

terms. Monopolies and oligopolies, which Smith denounced, reduced competition and interfered with the natural law of supply and demand.³

Corporate capitalism does not include these elements of free market philosophy as can be seen: (i) by the heartbreaking treatment of many third-world workers who must toil under Dickensian conditions (violating the mobility of labor principle); (ii) by the common TNC tactic of shifting capital from nation to nation in search of lower operating costs (violating the principle of capital immobility); (iii) by, for example, the \$448 billion a year of U.S. government money doled out in corporate “wealthfare,” (Zepezauer and Naiman, 1996, p. 6) as it has come to be called (violating the principle of minimal government intervention); (iv) in the separation between shareholders and management worsened by the presence of mutual funds and pension trusts splintering ownership into tens of thousands of hands (violating the principle of owner management); and (v) in the acknowledgement by experts that we do not live in a world of level playing fields but rather one gripped by several hundred business behemoths that regulate trade and commerce:

Transnational corporations have consolidated their power and control over the world. Today, forty-seven of the top one hundred economies in the world are actually transnational corporations; 70 percent of global trade is controlled by just five hundred corporations; and a mere 1 percent of the TNC’s on this planet own half the total stock of foreign direct investment. (Clarke, 1996, p. 298)

The point in introducing this distinction is partially to show that the following critique of corporate capitalism, though transferrable for the most part to free market capitalism, does not wholly apply to the latter. To the extent that corporate and free market capitalism both adhere to points (A)–(C), they fare equally poorly along three of the four scales of well-being; namely, environmental health, psychological health, and animal cruelty. But if free market capitalism includes (D)–(H), it might resist the critique of corporate capitalism regarding democracy and

human rights. The reason is that small businesses, even if egocentric and profit-oriented, perhaps cannot undermine democracy in the way that, as discussed below, huge businesses with tremendous power can and do. Except for this distinction (an important distinction in light of the euphemistic ‘free market’ jargon often used to describe corporate capitalism) my criticism applies equally to corporate and free market ways of thinking and the terms are used interchangeably below to describe belief systems that espouse the critical points (A)–(C).

IV. Free market, corporate, and ecofeminism ideologies

Without further ado, the effects of free market, corporate and ecofeminist beliefs are compared. The basic argument is that in this day and age ecofeminist beliefs help construct a reality that tends toward the goal of a healthy world, whereas the egoistic doctrines tend, at best, to impede moral progress. Of course, it is assumed that certain criteria are indicative of moral goodness, and someone could, for instance, challenge the claim that, *ceteris paribus*, a world lacking institutionalized cruelty toward animals is morally better than one where animals are routinely subjected to pain and suffering. It is not the intention here to defend the following four measures of moral health. There is voluminous material on these issues, material that strays into the metaphysical and away from praxis and the practical. This essay demonstrates how certain ideas promote certain consequences, and puts to the side the task of philosophically evaluating the relative merits of the various consequences.

Democracy/human rights. Deborah Poff claims that nation states are caught in the rising tide of the nascent global economy, an economy geared to accommodate transnational corporations and international lenders whose profit-oriented behavior stands athwart the national protection of basic human rights and liberties:

Nation states, which, in liberal democracies, we view as protectors of basic rights, both positive and

negative, and basic civil liberties are, in fact, involved in global negotiations which may erode the very principles on which they are based. And this not only affects rights meant to ensure the quality of life . . . but also diminishes the possibility for the growth of democracy and democratic rights on a global scale. (Poff, 1994, p. 443)

One problem is that transnational corporations have become so powerful they can effectively extort nations for very favorable operating privileges. Resistance can lead to the TNC moving its operations to another country, which can exacerbate debt-problems in the offending country, contributing to a lower standard of life and a need to borrow money from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (Velasquez, 1995, p. 865).

The IMF imposes a “structural adjustment program” that includes “privatization, deregulation and liberalization of national economies.” In the developed world this has resulted in “a weakened, restructured labour force with lowered expectations” and serious damage to unions. In the developing world the result is a higher GDP yet also:

devalued domestic currencies, high unemployment, increased poverty and starvation, inflation of the cost of living, and, as a strategy for global competitiveness, the establishment of free trade zones within a number of these countries. (Poff, 1994, p. 440)

In addition to the debilitating machinations of TNC's, many countries turn to the IMF due to the juxtaposition of a fiercely competitive global market and the “debt crisis and the stagnation and economic insecurity of the 1980's.” (Poff, 1994, p. 440) Further, NAFTA and GATT magnify the problem, favoring the expansionist might of the TNC's and permitting them to penetrate nation-states with few restrictions and challenge protectionist laws and regulations. Disputes are settled by the World Trade Organization, whose unelected members act as a global parliament with legislative and judicial powers (Clarke, 1996, p. 301).

An ecofeminist mindset, conversely, taking a rights-inclusive ecocentric perspective, empha-

sizing virtue and compassion over the egocentric profit motive, and insisting that the voices of the oppressed and marginalized peoples be fully represented in moral decisions (which includes both economic and political decisions), would not nourish and extend anti-democratic procedures. Democracy and human rights would not be impediments to the goal or secondary considerations but ends in themselves. Social welfare would not be founded on the profit motive but rather more lofty considerations, with the result being, given the power of belief systems, a more virtuous society.

Environmental health. A society that maximizes satisfaction of materialistic wants, operating egocentrically toward what is at best an anthropocentric end, will see the environment solely in instrumental terms, land as capital, and ‘natural resources’ as fodder to fuel efficient productivity and consumption. Captains of industry will refrain from exploiting nature only insofar as is necessary to maintain an optimal supply of goods and services. This impoverished concern for the nonhuman community leads to a human-selected optimal level of pollution; that is, there is no standard of pollution outside of what we decide is best for gorging our product-hungry appetite. The lack of spirituality, virtue, or unselfishness in this scenario insures that the accepted level of pollution would scar and maim the beauty and wonder of our ecological regions. Indeed, a look at the TNC-dominated market of today verifies this sad fact. Although the above philosophy may seem insanely narrow, it is touted unabashedly by its academic defenders:

Recently scientists have informed us that use of DDT in food production is causing damage to the penguin population [but] damage to penguins, or sugar pines, or geological marvels is, without more, simply irrelevant . . . It may be said by way of objection to this position, that it is very selfish of people to act as if each person represented one unit of importance and nothing else was of any importance. Nevertheless I think it is the only tenable starting place for analysis . . . no other position corresponds to the way most people really think and act – i.e. corresponds to reality. (Baxter, 1994, p. 340)

The citation concludes that the free market belief in human egoism corresponds to reality; however, this assumes that socioethical theories merely correspond to reality and don't help determine reality. As mentioned above, perhaps the observed selfish behavior is the result of a self-validating reduction. Ecofeminism proposes a much more dignified view of humanity, arguing that human nature is largely socially constructed and that humans are not inevitably egocentric but rather can aspire to a more enlightened perspective. In this fashion the nonhuman community is respected and economic standards of success are modified accordingly.⁴ Again, beliefs create realities. If we embrace a worldview of selfishness, we will bloat the propensities for selfishness inherent in humanity. If, conversely, we embrace virtue, we nourish the seeds of virtue in the human heart.

Cruelty toward animals. The anthropocentric rationale propping free-market ideology does not treat animals as more than objects, let alone grant them rights. As we see in society today, the competition for profit and productivity strips many nonhumans of all respect. In the United States, over six billion chickens and millions of cattle and hogs are slaughtered yearly (Singer, 1990, Ch. 3). Most of these animals live meager stygian lives within factory farms, where their unspeakable treatment is epitomized by statements such as the following from animal-farming literature:

Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him [sic] just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication. Breeding season like the first step in an assembly line. And marketing like the delivery of finished goods (Byrnes, 1976, p. 30).

Ecofeminists, on the other hand, consider factory farming a form of oppression, insist that the umbrella of rights be extended to cover animals, and voice their horror over the current nightmare:

Intensive factory farming in the United States involves the denial of the beingness of more than seven billion animals yearly. The impersonal names bestowed on them – such as food-producing unity,

protein harvester, computerized unity in a factory environment, egg-producing machine, converting machine, biomachine, crop – proclaim that they have been removed from nature. But this is no reason for ecofeminism to fail to reclaim farm animals from this oppressive system. (Adams, 1994, p. 99)

Psychological health. One can argue that currently implemented forms of capitalism foster a dysfunctional psychological profile by noting that: first, there is substantial evidence and learned agreement that humanity is facing a global environmental crisis and that the TNC's, by actuating the ideology of corporate capitalism, have played a major role in fomenting this unprecedented crisis (Brenkert, 1995, p. 675); and second, belief systems that are crisis-oriented – that is, tending “to create a more crisis-prone and crisis-ridden world” – reinforce and are reinforced by a dysfunctional psychology (Richardson and Curwen, 1995, p. 551). Hence, a line is established between the current global crisis, the economic belief system that contributes to it, and the psychological health of the agents enacting the belief system.

This mode of argumentation follows Richardson and Curwen, who argue that free market philosophy encourages a business mentality that holds unhealthy crisis-prone beliefs and that these beliefs are a key element in enacting harm:

Business decline [resulting from crisis] is due largely to the existence within crisis-prone organizations of strongly-held (and inappropriate) beliefs . . . These beliefs, and the decline process, are protected by a denial mechanism. (Richardson and Curwen, 1995, p. 551)

The authors' explication of this comprehensive “denial mechanism” includes several component defense mechanisms: denial (conscious refusal to acknowledge the developing crisis), disavowal (a lesser form of denial), fixation (“rigid fixation to a particular course”), grandiosity (“an expression of powerfulness”), and intellectualization (faulty rationalizing to maintain confidence) (Richardson and Curwen, 1995, p. 553).

In addition to creating denial, self-deceiving

rationalizations and myopic grandiosity, free-market psychological dysfunction can result in emotional constriction, an attenuated ability to both feel emotions and express them broadly. Tying the discussion back to domination, objectification, and dissociation, it seems these psychological conditions reduce ability to feel for others by turning them into objects, distancing oneself from them emotionally, and considering them lesser and thereby exploitable. The relationship between emotionally constrictive states and free market ideology can be presented as follows:

Belief/Attitude	Psychological effect
Egocentrism anthropocentrism	Dissociation
Profit motive/'monefication'	Objectification
Competition/individualism	Domination

The connections among the aspects of the unhealthy mindset are complex (e.g. dissociation can lead to objectification or domination, or vice versa) and this simple table is not meant to capture all possible relations – relations that are two-way and intricate – between free market beliefs and emotionally constrictive psychologies. Nevertheless, certain interactions are suggested. For instance, egocentrism can generate dualisms (me/them, corporation/labor, etc.) and this self-aggrandizing dualistic belief system can lead to a diminished ability to love or care about others spiritually or in any other sense.

Similarly, putting a monetary price on humans (as in the Ford Pinto case) or animals for the purpose of commerce relegates them to the category of fungible things like cars, stereos, and other material goods. A related and widespread phenomenon of objectification occurs in advertising when, for instance, a female model is draped over an automobile, suggesting that she is a hood ornament or that she can be bought with a fancy car, in either case reducing a human being to a commodity. Fur coats, meat products, and so forth inflict a similar though more drastic form of objectification on animals.

Finally, an extreme emphasis on individualism (each person is responsible for bettering his or her own condition) and competition can lead to

a Lombardi-esque “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing” mentality geared toward degrading the losers and pedestalizing the winners (measured by economic success) to such a degree that the winners are seen as justified in dominating and exploiting the losers. This is certainly happening between corporations as mergers and acquisitions proceed at a rate unvisited since the 1920’s. The acquired company is often downsized, steeped in crippling debts, then left discarded and broken by the original buyers (Bartlett and Steele, 1992, Ch. 4). Another side of this competitive mentality is a sort of economic thrasymachianism or extreme Calvinism, as evidenced by the sweatshop travail of third-world garment-industry workers. One can only speculate on what exactly goes through the mind of CEO’s that countenance the impoverishment and humiliation of thousands of people for outrageous profits, but it seems plausible that some psychological dominance mechanism dampening empathy, denying the dignity and beauty of life, and propping a they-are-weaker/inferior-and-deserve-what-they-get attitude is operational.

Whereas free-market ideology motivates emotional constriction, irrational destructive defense mechanisms, and personality distortions (e.g. grandiosity), ecofeminist theory targets the unhealthy mindset as a source of global harm and seeks a cure through the radical restructuring of the late 20th-century Western psyche. Empathic connection is encouraged and incorporated into morality, while morality is incorporated into politics and business; hence business persons are not compartmentalized in the sense of acting like Jekyll in private life and Hyde in the ruthless world of economic competition. Materialism, hedonism, and egocentrism are rejected as negative self-fulfilling prophecies and reductions, and the desideratum is ecocentric awareness bringing harmony and psychomoral health at all levels of the holism: self, family, community, bioregion, nation-state, transnational, global environment. This is essentially a gestalt shift from a limited Hobbesian view of humanity to a paradigm of virtue establishing responsibility, fellow feeling, and an awareness of personhood as a tapestry woven by the many interdependent strands of life.

V. Ecofeminist capitalism

Shortly, two methods of implementing ecofeminist insights are discussed. These methods are meant to operate within a system of capitalism and militate toward radical modifications that nonetheless in some significant sense preserve key principles. It would be facilitative, then, before discussing them, to present an embryonic conception of ecofeminist capitalism.

A standard definition of capitalism includes four elements: market competition, private ownership, the existence of companies, and the centrality of the profit motive (Shaw and Barry, 1998, p. 143). An inconsistency between these criteria and ecofeminism arises only if the profit motive is taken to imply the insatiable-egocentric-consumer model of human nature. Ecofeminism denies that humans are fixed as insatiable egocentric consumers, and reformulates the concept of humanity to produce a different economic philosophy:

(1) Human happiness involves satisfying complex psychological needs that cannot be met by a heavy emphasis on material consumption. Humans exist in many-layered mutually defining interactions with other persons and nature. As regards personal well-being, maintaining the health of the whole is critical, and toward this end, ecocentric consumption is much more fulfilling than egocentric consumption.

(2) The good society serves the good of the whole through promoting consumption practices that work toward eliminating oppression and environmental degradation. Economic growth takes place only within the boundaries of sustainability and respect for nature.

(3) Ecocentric economic activity serves human interests better than egocentric economic striving. Since individual well-being is closely linked with the well-being of human society and the nonhuman world, and humanity achieves satisfaction through psychological health and moral integrity as well as consumption of material goods, anti-oppression pro-environment commerce best serves one of the crucial goals of society: human flourishing.

In ecofeminist capitalism, competition exists, private ownership exists, companies exist, and

even the drive for profit exists. There is, however, a crucial change in what can and should count as profit. Profit is no longer, to speak somewhat simplistically, money, but rather money earned in certain ways and toward certain ends, ends that include consumption and yet not merely consumption; instead, one consumes goods and services in such a way that the health of the whole is promoted, where health is understood in terms of ecofeminist principles. Ecofeminist capitalism maintains, perhaps provocatively, that a robust drive for consumption and profit is compatible with ecocentric attitudes and lifestyles. The human desire for purchasing multifarious products is not denied. What is denied is that such purchasing must be egocentric and divisive, pitting ravenous hedonists against the environment and embroiling them in myopic struggles for status and power.

A redefinition of profit along lines compatible with ecofeminist principles takes rudimentary form in Halstead and Cobb's alternative to the GDP, the GPI – the genuine progress indicator (1996: 203). The genuine progress indicator mandates that certain previously ignored costs – costs monetary, environmental, and psychological – enter into the productivity calculation. These hidden costs, once factored into the equation, push toward due respect and better treatment for the oppressed, belittled, and/or degraded. The costs considered by the GPI include:

Resource depletion . . . The new GPI measures the consumption and depletion of resources, wetlands, farmland, and minerals (including oil) as a current cost, which is weighed against the short-term economic gain from this depletion.

Pollution. The GPI subtracts the costs of air and water pollution as measured by actual damage to human health and environment.

Income distribution. The GPI rises when the poor receive a larger share of national income and falls when their share decreases.

Housework and nonmarket transactions. Much of the most important work in a society is what we do for ourselves within our own homes . . . cooking, cleaning, home repairs, and similar tasks. The GPI

includes the value of the time spent on these activities. (Halstead and Cobb, 1996, p. 203)

The GPI redefines and sharpens the techniques for measuring economic growth, highlighting factors previously considered "external" to primary business goals. Yet it is more than a precision device for calculation or a tool of regulation. It embodies certain values consonant with social evolution of the status quo toward a new consciousness, and thereby aids a transition from our "culture of narcissism," as Lasch calls it, to a more mature development of the mind.

A second means of inchoately activating ecofeminist insights derives from Stephen Gould's "Buddhist perspective on business ethics." In accord with the ecofeminist contention that changes in psychology must occur if we are to achieve a self-validating expansion, this perspective provides a practical introspective tool in that it offers a

rather distinct . . . perspective on the inner thoughts and feelings of the individual which illuminates ethical concerns in very practical ways and helps to inform decision makers with a deeply felt, experientially-based ethical consciousness. (1995, p. 63)

Gould discusses Buddhist techniques such as visualizing, thought-experimentation, and meditative exercises that "bring us face to face phenomenologically and existentially with our innermost ethical impulses." Some of the goals of this inward-turning are the development of empathy, a compassionate attitude toward all sentient beings, and an ability to "recognize and understand suffering in all its aspects and dimensions, both obvious and subtle." (p. 63) These goals cohere with ecofeminist efforts to expand awareness, transfigure self-consciousness and instigate virtuous caring relations between persons, communities, and ecosystems. Buddhism also "focuses on the interdependence and interconnectedness of all people and of all things," again, linking with ecofeminist doctrine (p. 67).

Whereas the shift from GDP to GPI emphasizes an institutional level of change and motivates personal transformation indirectly, the Buddhist method takes "a bottom up approach

whose starting point and unswerving main focus is on the individual and his or her experiences and sense of self-responsibility." (p. 64) Gould's techniques offer a practical way for individuals to begin modifying their self- and moral-orientation (e.g. from anthropocentric to ecocentric), gaining edification in the process. The suggestion is not that everyone convert to Buddhism but rather that adoption of certain Buddhist methodologies would be psychologically beneficial and conducive to ecofeminist capitalism.

Schumacher's classic essay "Buddhist Economics" comes to mind, with its focus on the principle of "Right Livelihood." On this view, work has at least three purposes: (a) to give persons an opportunity to develop their essential potentials, (b) to enable them to transcend their "ego-centredness," and (c) to produce goods and services as needed for a healthy lifestyle (Schumacher, 1973, p. 54). The economic system is so organized that it incorporates the necessity for well-being into its very structure. This harmonizes with the goal of ecofeminist capitalism to suffuse the processes of commerce with maturity. There is no stark contrast between the ethical activities of the corporation and the ethical activities of the private citizen. Work becomes meaningful and harmonious with one's worldview, conducing to eudemonia. Ecofeminist capitalism and Buddhist economics stand united on this point:

To organize work in such a manner that it becomes meaningless, boring, stultifying, or nerve-racking for the worker would be little short of criminal; it would indicate a greater concern with goods than with people, an evil lack of compassion and a soul-destroying degree of attachment to the most primitive side of this worldly existence. (Schumacher, 1973, p. 55)

VI. Conclusion

A number of points have been submitted for consideration: that human beliefs modify reality and chart our destiny; that human nature is not fixed as insatiable and egocentric but derives in large part from cultural beliefs; that we are currently

facing a global environmental crisis seriously threatening human and nonhuman health; that corporate and free-market ideology operates as a self-validating reduction exacerbating this crisis; that, given these four points, we should change our beliefs to instigate processes of self-validating expansion; that ecofeminism offers a worldview and capitalism consonant with such an expansion; and, finally, that implementable procedures aiding the shift to an ecofeminist worldview and capitalism are available on both the institutional and personal level. This essay embraces the possibility that humans can use self-determination to bring about a planet pervaded on all levels with moral and psychological excellence. It would be naive to think that such a transfiguration could occur within a brief historical span; but it would be, in contrast, tragic and perhaps fatal not to take strides in this direction.

Notes

¹ Carolyn Merchant (1995, p. 216) criticizes ecocentrism because it can potentially lead to “holistic fascism,” placing the good of the whole over that of the individual to the extent that some persons are sacrificed or seriously harmed. Her analysis, however, runs roughshod over the ecofeminist literature. Warren, for instance, incorporates a theory of rights into her ecocentric ethic. It is not inconsistent for an ecocentric ethic to include a theory of rights that debars cruel treatment of persons.

² The ecofeminist ethic unfolding in this essay is harmonious with Dobson and White’s feminist business ethic (1995, p. 463). The authors develop a virtue ethic based on Thomas White’s analysis (1992, p. 51) of the groundbreaking separation between the (feminine) care ethic and the (masculine) rights ethic introduced by Carol Gilligan (1982).

The care ethic is characterized by contextual/narrative thinking, a focus on the health of relationships, a personal/emotional point of view, motivation through care, and a relational sense of self. The rights ethic is characterized by universal principles, abstraction from context, an impersonal point of view, motivation through duty, an emphasis on rights as primarily defining the boundaries of proper living, and an autonomous-isolative sense of self.

The ecofeminist ethic is clearly a care ethic, as its historical development and content demonstrates

(Gaard, 1993, p. 2), though it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully bring out the connections.

³ These points come from Werhane (1991, pp. 105, 126), Korten (1996, pp. 185–188), and Chomsky (1994, p. 180). Although Smith did not focus on oligopolies, he understood monopolies as being “the power of a seller to maintain a price for an indefinite time above its natural price” (Korten, p. 186). This seems to place oligopolies within the category of industry that hampers the flow of the invisible hand.

⁴ The topic of whether human nature is largely biologically determined and hence immune to significant social influence is of course controversial. Nonetheless, a great deal of argumentation and research conducted by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and other scholars tends toward a denial of the biological thesis. For instance, psychologists Wade and Tavris examine five sources of behavior – biology, cognition (beliefs), environment, other people, culture – and none is presented as outweighing the others (1993, p. 684). Moreover, historical evidence indicates that the voracious-consumer model of human nature was constructed and instilled through advertising and other social forces during the 19th century to fuel the industrial revolution (Clapp, 1996, p. 19).

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