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Nature, Human Ecopsychological Consciousness and the Evolution of Paradigm Change in the Face of Current Ecological Crisis

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This paper explores factors that contribute to the ecological crisis of the contemporary time, including philosophical, psychological, and spiritual beliefs that have contributed to the current situation. Recognition is paid to the role of reductionist Cartesian thought and centuries of attempted separation from nature. Contributions of Jungian, post-Jungian, depth, and transpersonal scholars fortify an understanding of the subtle perceptual shifts for change to become possible. Recognition of humanity's interconnectivity with all life is proposed as a key factor in building motivation toward becoming agents of change, concluding with a call for co-created praxis toward regeneration of connection to life in all its forms.

Keywords: *despiritualized, nature, ecology, ecopsychology, depth psychology, Jung, post-Jungian, non-dualism, interconnection, ecopsychology, transpersonal ecology, embodied nature, phenomenology, praxis, collective grief, greening*

This is a brief exploratory outline of both post-Jungian and transpersonal approaches to an understanding of the human psychological relationship to nature, that is, to natural processes.

In this era, a Western technological, materialistic dominate-and-use paradigm has been the prevailing view of the human relationship to nature in most developed and developing societies. It is characterized by a reductionistic, exploitative, despiritualized attitude toward natural processes, sometimes extending to include human life processes as well. In 1938, C. G. Jung addressed the way in which science had led to an undermining of earlier beliefs about the natural world:

Science, curiously enough, began with the discovery of astronomical laws, and hence with the withdrawal of, so to speak, the most distant projections. This was the first stage in the despiritualization of the world. One step followed another: already in antiquity the gods were withdrawn from mountains and rivers, from trees and animals. (Jung, 1969, p. 83)

In recent decades the destructive results of this overarching system of materialistic science are beginning to raise serious doubts about survivability

of this outmoded paradigm of separateness from the natural world, and of the very cultures that employ it. However, today a rapidly growing number of people worldwide are calling for change in this dominant colonizing, industrialized mode of thinking, arguing for a shift to an ecologically sustainable model, embracing regenerative and re-spiritualized attitudes toward nature.

Among these leaders, Joanna Macy (2013) has referred to “the greening of the self” which “helps us to reinhabit time and our own story as life on earth” (p. 156). Macy argued that major shifts in thoughts, beliefs, and actions are happening due to three converging developments. First, the ego-self is being psychologically and spiritually challenged by confrontation with dangers of mass annihilation. Second, systems theory presents the self as inseparable from sustaining relational webs, and third, there is the resurgence of non-dualistic spiritualities (Macy, 2013, p. 148), together essentially allowing individuals to, “recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings” (p. 149). Such perceptual shifts, supported through psychology, science, and spirituality are arguably first steps toward facing global issues and becoming effective agents of change. “The phenomena of perspective is therefore ubiquitous—not just in sense

experience, but in our intellectual, social personal, cultural, and historical self-understanding, all of which are anchored in our bodily being in the world” (Carman, 2012, p. xi).

Contemporary author Andy Fisher (2013), concerned with ingrained belief of separation from nature, cited French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty among others as catalysts of a philosophical turning point away from “the Cartesian mechanizing of the body and disembodiment of the soul” (p. 59), thus beginning a turning away from historical prejudices against the body. Despite this, Fisher noted, “today, the dominant model of the body is still a scientific one: a physiological system with no significant relations to the world; a material container for the mind” (p. 59). Against this, Merleau-Ponty noted that bodily felt intentions are the threads that connect persons to the world, and Eugene Gendlin and Carol Tavris (1970) simplified this further by asserting that “psychological events are body events” (p. 59). David Abram (1996) deftly observed that the human body has evolved in conjunction with Earth: “Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth . . . to shut ourselves off from these other voices . . . is to rob our own senses of their integrity” (p. 22). Remembering oneself as embodied nature *within* a grand ecosystem opens the possibility of effecting change as one embraces the fullness of organized wholeness.

Beginning in the 20th century, psychology focused on human and nature interactions in terms of health and pathology. C. G. Jung (1969) and A. H. Maslow (1971/1993), for example, both emphasized that humans live in and through nature, and that to live as if separate from nature by beliefs and actions could lead to individual, group, societal, and cultural illness, conflict and destruction. As one becomes conscious of human ecology relating to Earth ecology, the split between mind and body, plant and animal, mine and yours, becomes not only questionable, but dangerous. Erich Neumann (1994), in discussing the impracticability of separating a spiritual from a natural world concluded that, “Above and below, heaven and earth, spirit and nature, are experienced again as *coniunctio*, and the calabash that contains them is the totality of reality itself” (p. 215). Humankind’s position as exploiter of natural resources, through a belief that we are superior, separate, and therefore entitled, has

brought us to the brink of ecological bankruptcy which also echoes a psychological bankruptcy.

The vision of the cosmos emerging is profoundly relational, and therefore by definition ecological. Everything, at least at some level, is connected to everything else. Even consciousness seems to be imminent in the cosmos. Humans, then, cannot see themselves as separated from the world around them. We are challenged to take this new but ancient understanding to heart and attempt to live this consciousness of interconnection in our daily lives. (Hathaway & Boff, 2009, p.193)

The act of allowing this consciousness of interconnection into daily life can be subtly profound. One may not know what effect this awareness will bring. There is a need for willingness to be changed by an expanding interconnected consciousness, to be courageous enough for a sense of security and knowingness that allows movement toward the unknown in relation to an emerging asymmetry of change. Just as centuries of adaptation to the written word has changed the experience of linear time and abstraction, technological cultures might find themselves moving once again toward more indigenous practices of expressing time and place. “Time, in such a world, is not separable from the circular life of the sun and moon, from the eternal return of the greening earth” (Abram, 1996, p. 185). Humans exist in a fundamentally creative environment in which adaptation arises within evolution. Kauffman (2008) wrote:

We live in a different universe from that envisioned by reductionism. ... The evolution of the universe, biosphere, the human economy, human culture, and human is profoundly creative ... we do not know beforehand what adaptations may arise in the evolution of the biosphere ... what will arise even in the grains of dust that grow by aggregation and chemical reactions to form planetesimals. The wondrous diversity of life out your window evolved in ways that largely could not be foretold. So, too, has the human economy in the past fifty thousand years, as well as human culture and law. They are not only emergent, but radically unpredictable. (p. 5)

Jung, among other depth psychology theorists, had recognized that humans are part of nature,

continuous with it, and profoundly affected by it. In his depth psychological view, humans, from pre-history to contemporary times, have tended to psychologically project various beliefs onto nature. In a modern scientifically oriented era these projections have tended to be withdrawn, leaving a despiritualized view of nature. Jung's perspective has been further refined by post-Jungian writers, such as Tacey (2009) who summarized how these projections operate in three developmental ways: (1) premodern literalism and supernaturalism or animism in which, "spirits of the earth are treated as forces 'out there' in the world, requiring intercessions and interventions" (p. 25); (2) modern disbelief and skepticism, the dominant view of Western science, "having no regard for cosmic forces apart from viewing them as telltale projections of the human mind" (p. 26); (3) Post-rational vision that allows the forces of the earth to be considered real again, "but their traditional forms are regarded as outdated and appropriate for an earlier time" (p. 26).

Since human projections, or the lack thereof, require a reassessment and revised understanding of the human-nature relationship in order to avoid possible illness or disaster, Tacey (2009) has argued for a necessary next step: "We urgently need new cosmologies and symbolic systems appropriate to our advanced, post-scientific view of the world" (p. 26). From within a post-Jungian theoretical framework he looked further into the dynamics of the projective system,

The most profound projections are expressions of archetypal reality that speak of the nature of reality. In other words, these projections do not only belong inside us, or to the human mind, but might belong inside the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*. (p. 27)

In this view, the human mind is but a part of the soul of the world, as it also is a part of the human organism. Hogenson (2004) stated that Jung worked from a, "deep commitment to an evolutionary theory of mind," and that "a crucial aspect of Jung's entire project was his commitment to linking depth psychology, to the extent possible, to the larger scientific program of the twentieth century" (p. 43). With this in mind, and within Tacey's (2009) third way of imagining the invisible, it is certainly within the task of the post-Jungian perspective to continue following the links between depth psychology and emerging science. Although Jung himself may have

been thinking along the lines of a synthesis between science, image as psyche, formulation of archetype, and so forth, his era was primarily that of Tacey's second way, modern disbelief and skepticism.

At this point such a post-Jungian perspective may be seen to engage a larger question, one that considers individual and social psychology and humanity's planetary home, that reaches across cultures, and includes the deepest levels of the unconscious and the farther reaches of higher consciousness. In a further call for what is needed, Tacey (2009) stated, "We stand on the brink of a new dispensation, where we become receptive again to the transpersonal forces of earth and world" (p. 26). Here transpersonal forces are seen as inclusive of both the human psychological reality and the earth and the entire world of nature—in fact of everything in the world.

Ecopsychology advocates certain images and concepts which reintegrate human identity with the natural world and which parallel those within transpersonal psychology. ... These views stand in contrast to views that nature is dangerous and needs to be controlled and dominated or that nature is (merely) a useful resource to be exploited, protected, conserved or stewarded. (Davis & Canty, 2013, p. 600)

This is an expanded understanding of *transpersonal* as it has developed in transpersonal psychology, and it is also useful in engaging the highly relevant scientific discipline of ecology, which has itself been expanded to include what Fox (1990) has termed *transpersonal ecology*. Davis and Canty (2013) explained the idea that a transpersonal view of human-nature relationships includes, "conceiving of nature as an expanded and more-inclusive self," and that "a transpersonal view goes beyond the nature-as-self image without invalidating it. Such a transpersonal view recognizes that both human and nature are expressions of the same ground of being" (pp. 600-601).

Ecological theory has also touched on both depth psychological and transpersonal psychological interpretations with Roszak's (1992) term *ecological unconscious*, which connects the outer living world with that of the individual's psyche, and Naess' (1989) term the *ecological self*; paralleling transpersonal psychology's notion of a larger self reached by transcending boundaries of I and other. Each of these enables an expanded definition

and conceptualization of human psychological structures. It also carries the potentiality for ecopsychology to aid transpersonal psychology in “realizing the natural world as a portal to the transpersonal” (Davis & Canty, 2013, p. 608).

As the scope of this paper is to outline post-Jungian, ecopsychological, and transpersonal psychology theories concerning one of the greatest challenges of this time, that of ecological crisis, the next step is a call for research and development of praxis to help shift the deeply imbedded reductionist, exploitive paradigm to an open acknowledgement of collective grief, inseparable interdependence, and open-mindedness toward change that aligns with sustainability. Bringing together depth psychological, post-Jungian, and transpersonal ecological approaches in order to discover possible shared axiology and co-create methodologies for engaging the topic is a next step in engaging the dominant life-threatening status quo. It is imperative to engage the question of what is being asked of human persons now, and as Aizenstat (1995) reminded,

In order to build a respectful and sustaining relationship with the world, we must first recover a sensibility that is informed by the psyche of nature, an awareness that our essential psychological spontaneities are rooted most deeply in the psyche of the natural world. We are born out of the rhythms of nature and to destroy nature’s psyche is ultimately, to end our own. The responsibility of the Depth Psychologist [post-Jungian, transpersonal ecologist] is advocacy on behalf of all who share our world.” (p. 98)

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Karen Palamos, MA, LMFT, holds a Master's degree (1998) in Counseling Psychology with an emphasis in Transpersonal Psychology from John F. Kennedy University and a Master's degree (2015) in Depth Psychology with an emphasis in Community Psychology, Liberation Psychology, and Ecopsychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. A licensed psychotherapist, she has a private practice in San Francisco, CA, and also serves as director of a counseling center where she trains, supervises and mentors MFT interns. She is currently a PhD candidate at Pacifica Graduate Institute. Her interests include artistic pursuits and an appreciation of aesthetics, music, being in nature, and bird watching.

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