

The Separation from More-than-Human Nature

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Many ecopsychologists seem to share a belief that modern humans are somehow separated or disconnected from more-than-human nature. To most ecopsychologists, the existence of a human-nature disconnection in most modern individuals and in modern culture as a whole may be self-evident: In industrial societies, most people live indoors and most interactions take place either with other people or with human-made artifacts. Most people spend more time watching television than being outdoors. More people go to theme parks than go to national parks. Many ecopsychologists claim that this physical separation from the natural world leads to a psychological disconnection, that the physical separation arises from the psychological alienation, or both.

For ecopsychologists, the psychological or spiritual disconnection from more-than-human nature can lead to:

a. ecologically destructive behaviour. Separation from nature on a cultural level is seen as a root cause of the ecological crisis.

b. various forms of individual human suffering. Some addiction, anxiety, depression, and anger are seen as reactions to the disconnection from nature.

c. various forms of social and collective suffering. Racism, sexism, violence, and alienation from society are seen as arising along with the disconnection from nature.

There is an alternative view within ecopsychology: Environmental damage and human suffering may result less from a disconnection from nature than from more proximate causes acting on social institutions or on individuals in their roles of investor, producer, or consumer. Many economists and behavioural psychologists have argued that environmental degradation has resulted from the incentives built into the economic

or social system (Scitovsky, 1992). The voluntary simplicity movement (Dominguez & Robin, 1992; Elgin, 1993) is based on the premise that consumerism is the result of a dysfunctional relationship to money or the artifacts of civilization along with a lack of relationship with nature. Thus, the psychological separation from nature may be seen as a consequence, as well as a cause, of consumerism (Durning, 1995; Kanner & Gomes, 1995). These important alternative views will be considered in more detail in other papers.

There have been a number of conceptualizations of the separation between humans and nature. This paper reviews some of these concepts; other papers will explore their usefulness both in psychotherapy and in environmental activism. This is a review of some of the different viewpoints in ecopsychology; little attempt has been made to present the richness of these various proposals or to evaluate them.

In the literature, two different but related questions have been addressed about the separation from more-than-human nature: How could the separation have originated? How is the separation best conceptualized? We will now examine the range of answers for these two questions.

Possible origins of the separation

Paul Shepard (1982) created a tradition in ecopsychological discourse of trying to trace the disconnection from nature to its earliest beginnings. He saw the separation from nature as resulting from the domestication of plants and animals by early pastoralists and agriculturists. Quinn (1992) placed the separation (the forgetting) a bit later, at the beginning of what he described as "totalitarian agriculture." Others have seen the separation as arising later in prehistory with the appearance of the first cities. These views see the hunter-gatherer economy as the basis of a spiritual connection to nature and the agricultural lifestyle as the foundation of the separation from nature.

Some writers have placed the separation from nature much earlier in human

prehistory. Bookchin (1991) saw the separation as perhaps beginning with the first tools or with the beginnings of language. Other ecopsychologists have been attracted to the narratives of sociobiology or evolutionary psychology (Allman, 1994, Wilson, 1975), which explore the evolutionary roots of contemporary human behaviour. The separation from more-than-human nature is seen as rooted in the very nature of humans.

Others have suggested that the separation has historical, rather than prehistoric, roots. The Judeo-Christian tradition has been seen as central to the separation from nature (White, 1967). For others, Greek rationalism has been the source of the separation. Abram (1996) saw the separation from nature as resulting from the development of alphabetic writing, with Plato being the first major post-literacy philosopher. Cohen (1997) has made a similar suggestion, seeing the separation (new-brain stories) as a consequence of literacy. For both these writers, a distinction can be drawn between nature-connected, animistic language and disconnected, literacy-based language.

Others have seen the separation from nature as arising with the enlightenment, rationalism, the industrial revolution, or other changes in European culture in the 15th to 18th centuries. For example, Marshall (1994) has traced the evolution of the idea of nature in Western civilization with an emphasis on colonialism, capitalism, and the industrial revolution. Winter (1996) saw the separation as occurring with the rise of rationalism in Europe in the eighteenth century.

All these historical and prehistoric accounts share the belief that contemporary agricultural and urban human communities were at one time connected with nature but have now lost that connection. Implicit in some of these views is the possibility that there are contemporary human cultures which have not become separated from more-than-human nature. If this is the case, then ecological wisdom can be obtained from these groups who may be less separated from nature than mainstream industrial society. Depending on which theory of the origin of the separation is adopted, it has been

suggested that ecopsychology could look to non-Western cultures, non-Judeo-Christian cultures, non-literate cultures, non-urban cultures, hunter-gatherer cultures, or to cultures that practice Shamanism, ancestor worship, or Animism for connection and ecological wisdom.

According to some writers humans are indeed separated from nature, but this may not be solely the result of having lost an earlier state of connectedness. Some humanistic and transpersonal psychologists see human life as a process of growth and development rather than as an overcoming of past trauma. Thus, Wilber (1996) and others have suggested that human consciousness is evolving and expanding from unconsciousness to an individual self to an ecological self and eventually to a self that includes the entire universe (Hillman, 1995). The connection with nature, in addition to being something we may once have had but have now lost, is seen as a higher level towards which we can move.

Models of the separation

Different writers have conceptualized the separation from nature differently. Several writers have used mental illness metaphors: Shepard (1982) saw the separation from nature resulting in arrested development, with people in modern culture never maturing completely. Roszak (1992) suggested the existence of an ecological unconscious. He seemed to suggest that Freud's *id*, the natural part of the personality, should be valued instead of repressed. Metzner (1995), also from a psychoanalytic perspective, has suggested that the disconnection is analogous to the dissociation sometimes seen in abuse victims; a similar position has been presented by Glendinning (1994).

Some Jungian and transpersonal theorists have suggested that contemporary society has a concept of self that is too limited to incorporate the more-than-human world. Hillman (Hillman, 1995; Hillman and Ventura, 1992) has written about the

concept of an enlarged, ecological self. Wilber (1996) has suggested something very similar, as have deep ecologists (Bragg, 1996). Aizenstat (1995) provided a perspective from depth psychology that we can uncover a world unconscious of which we are normally only faintly aware.

Another view of the separation is based on cognition and language as well as on psychodynamic or transpersonal processes. Greenway (1995) has suggested that dualistic language separates us from nature, while non-dualistic language can be used to express connection. Cohen (1997) has identified new-brain, nature-disconnected language as the barrier to connecting with nature. According to Cohen, our socialization provides us with "wranglers" that actively prevent our using nature-connected language, much as Freud's *superego* represses impulses from the *id*.

It may be that our separation is a matter of perception or consciousness. Sewall (1995) has suggested that modern people have learned not to perceive certain phenomena in nature; Cohen (1997) has made a similar suggestion. Most ecopsychologists would agree that the disconnection from nature or its opposite, connection, may be seen as altered states of consciousness.

Overview

Ecopsychological writing has been dominated by a family of proposals based on the notion that technological, economic, or social change (e.g., agriculture, printing, cities, rationalism) has led to a psychological and cultural separation from nature and that most contemporary cultures teach this separation to each new generation. In many ways, this view is analogous to the Judeo-Christian view of a fall from grace into sin, which is sometimes conceptualized as a disconnection (Baima, 1995), or to the psychodynamic view that mental illness and dissociation are the result of earlier trauma.

Three alternative views have also appeared in the ecopsychology literature:

a. That proximate causes such as advertising and economic incentives separate

us from the natural world; that consumer society is more a cause than a result of the psychological separation from nature.

b. That it is human nature to be psychologically separated from nature. This is the sociobiological view of ecopsychology.

c. That the separation from nature is a primitive human characteristic and that we can grow towards a greater sense of connection with nature and the rest of the universe. This is the transpersonal and spiritual growth view of ecopsychology.

Does it matter?

Clearly, all these stories about the origins of the separation and all these metaphors for the disconnection from nature are just what they seem -- metaphors and stories. No doubt some of them are more plausible or compelling than others, and if the truth were known, some of them would be closer to the truth than others. These investigations and speculations are interesting and important, but when we ask practical questions about the consequences of the separation or about ways to reconnect people to nature, the differences among these various myths and metaphors may or may not be important. From the pragmatic perspective of doing either psychotherapy or environmental activism, we need to concern ourselves with theoretical differences that might inform different courses of action. In the search for truth it matters which story is more accurate and this search will continue; in the search for solutions, the differences between the stories only matter if they have consequences for our lives.

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