

A critical appraisal of the uniqueness of ecopsychology as a field of study

Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph

Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan

Abstract

In this essay, I take a critical look at the so-called uniqueness of ecopsychology as a discipline that studies the relationship between nature and human life. My purpose here is not to underestimate the fresh awareness that ecopsychology has brought to modern society in the context of the above-mentioned relationship and the significant role it plays in modern psychological therapeutical practices. Rather, as a novice in ecopsychology, I view it from the point of view of its content, methodology and applications to assess the uniqueness of ecopsychology and how far it is different from other ecological and psychological disciplines. For me, ecopsychology as it is presented today is more of a concern of the developed occident than developing orient. But we can surely learn from each other. I am aware that just as I am a novice in ecopsychology, ecopsychology also is still in its swaddling clothes. But to be globally relevant and widely accepted, ecopsychology needs to present its purpose and methodology with more clarity. My purpose is to invite ecopsychology experts to catalyze that task.

Keywords: ecopsychology, dualism, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, animism

Introduction

Our world is in peril. How do we cope? It is one of the questions which the human world – I am sure even the nonhuman world – asks. The deterioration of our mother earth risks the survival of both the human and nonhuman worlds. With regard to many of the great environmental issues – climate change, the ozone layer depletion, acid rain, etc – experts are of the opinion that we and perhaps even the nonhuman world are past the point of no return. And so many agree that there is an urgent need to protect our planet. This urgency has necessitated the search for ways to accomplish the above-mentioned task.

There are many mainstream environment movements (Hibbard, 2003: 24-6) that try to address this crisis. Many try to address the issue scientifically by stressing development and/or rejection of new technologies. Others approach the issue philosophically/theologically, stressing the importance of a new environmental ethics that will promote simple and eco-friendly life styles (Schroll, 2007: 30). Still others have taken the issue politically, and emphasize the need to pass new laws that will enhance the protection of environment. There is no doubt that these movements were/are successful in sounding the alarm and getting political attention. But these movements are often criticized for “being... complicit in the social, cultural, and historical structures that are themselves responsible for the degradation of the Earth” (Fisher, 2006: 155).

Having felt the inadequacy of the existing solutions offered by the mainstream environment movements, there continues to be a need to search for better ways to deal with environmental issues. We need not only a few approaches and methods to protect the earth but need a worldview that defines the relationship between nature and human life on an experiential level, which in turn will heal the broken nature-human relation. Ecopsychology – relating to nature for understanding and healing the human-nature relationship – is one of the results of such a search.

The origins of ecopsychology and the lines of development were multi-faceted and slow¹. It was Theodore Roszak who popularized the term ‘ecopsychology’ in his book *The voice of the Earth: an exploration of ecopsychology* (1992). He defines ecopsychology as follows:

1. The emerging synthesis of ecology and psychology.
2. The skillful application of ecological insight to the practice of psychotherapy.
3. The study of our emotional bond with the Earth.
4. The search for an environmentally-based standard of mental health.
5. Re-defining “sanity” as if the whole world mattered².

However many agree that concepts propagated by and through ecopsychology as a

¹ A detailed discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. For more on the origins, history and development of ecopsychology, see Davis, 2006; Greenway, 2000; Hibbard, 2003: 27-28; Schroll, 2007; Scull, 2000, 2008.

² However there are writers who feel that this definition fails to convey all the concerns of ecopsychology. It also fails to acknowledge the contributions of indigenous science (Schroll, 2007: 30).

field of study are nothing very new. The term ecopsychology may be new, but the concepts and goals it contains “are old enough to be called aboriginal” (Roszak, 1995b: 5). The roots of ecopsychological ideas can be traced back to ancient Asian and Greek philosophies (Greenway, 2000). But there is no doubt that today ecopsychology as a new field of study explores the connections between ecological crisis and our dysfunctional relationship with the earth. It invites humans to be nature-centered. It invites us to approach the earth as a living organism. It invites us to experience the healing power of nature. The task is to combine “the sensitivity of therapists, the expertise of ecologists, and the ethical energy of environmental activists” (Brown, 1995: xvi)³. Until recently, most psychological practices were ‘human-centric’ and bypassed the relation between self and the natural world. In the therapeutic practices, too much responsibility remained in the hands of the psychologists. But ecopsychology stresses “an individual’s harmony with his or her ‘own deep self’ requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world” (Hillman, 1995: xix). The felt need of the hour is “an environmentally based definition of mental health”, and to analyze the “dysfunctional environmental relations” (Roszak, 1996). The focus now is less on the cut between the self and the world, and more on the interconnectedness of both: “[I]f the self is expanded to include the natural world, behavior leading to destruction of this world will be experienced as self-destruction” (Roszak, 1995b: 12).

Theodore Roszak, one of the main spokespersons of ecopsychology, calls it “a new beginning for environmentalism and a revolution in modern psychology” (as quoted in Fisher, 2006: 153). Lester R. Brown makes a mention of it as “environmental revolution” (Brown, 1995). But did the advent of ecopsychology in the 1990s really herald a revolution? For me the answer is no. In this essay, as a novice in ecopsychology, I take a critical look at the uniqueness of ecopsychology – which is often called a “meta-discipline” and “meta-field” (Greenway, 2000) – as a discipline that studies nature-human relationship. My purpose is not to underestimate the fresh awareness that ecopsychology has brought to developed modern societies about the need to engage more authentically, personally, and experientially with the world, nor the significant role it plays in modern psychotherapeutic practices. Rather, as an Oriental, I look at ecopsychology and try to analyze some of its contents,

³ Ecopsychology is not, however, to be confused with a number of other disciplines with similar name and areas of interest such as environmental psychology, conservation psychology, ecological psychology, human ecology, environmental education, deep ecology, ecospirituality, etc. They are related, but not the same (Hibbard, 2003: 24-26 & 28-32; Scull, 2008: 69-71).

methodologies and applications to assess its uniqueness and universal appeal⁴. A caveat: This essay is mostly a sharing of my personal experience with nature, which has a lot to do with my upbringing as a 'rural' Indian and my acquaintances with aboriginal people, mainly from India. Based on those experiences I ask myself – and also others – these questions: what is the uniqueness of ecopsychological concepts? What is the fresh awareness that ecopsychology gives me/us about the nature-human relationship? I do not dare to undertake a discussion on complex psychological and ecopsychological concepts because they lie beyond my present expertise.

Transcending dualism

One of the ideas that is central to ecopsychology is the need to transcend the human-nonhuman dualism, which many ecopsychologists cite as one of the main causes of the deterioration of environment. According to them, there are many factors that contribute to this dualism but religions, especially the Judeo-Christian religions, are the main culprit. For me these conclusions sound bizarre and far-fetched.

The so-called dualism – human and nonhuman – which ecopsychology tries to transcend has not been part of the existential experience of our aboriginal ancestors. They consciously or unconsciously lived as part of the web of life. They thought and lived 'ecopsychologically' long before the term "ecopsychology" emerged. The survival of aboriginal ancestors was centered on nature and their worldview and stories were full of nature. They nurtured and protected their environment. In ancient mythologies there were no essential differences between humans and animals. Even today there are hunter-gatherer tribes in different parts of the world who treat their prey with respect and ask forgiveness for taking their life e.g., the Washoe people (Washoe Tribe, 2012).

During my childhood I never heard of 'dualism'. Most of my childhood memories are associated with nature. My countryside home gave me ample opportunities to be with nature. I played in her lap and slept in her bosom. I took from her and contributed to her. Nature taught me the lessons of life and techniques of survival. The birth of a calf brought me joy and selling my animal friends, tears. Everything and everyone were interconnected, and in that relationship dualism had no place.

⁴ Many authors have pointed out the heavy dependence of ecopsychology on other related disciplines. They prefer to describe ecopsychology more broadly as a field of inquiry or as a project rather than a set of theories and beliefs. For more on this dependency and other related articles see Scull (2008: 73-5) and Fisher (2002).

The concept of dualism has been part of philosophies and world religions. I do accept that at different periods of time they have influenced our attitudes and approaches to nature-human relation both positively and negatively⁵. Having said that, I am very hesitant to accept any scholarly opinions that blame world religions for the brokenness of our world today. One of the religions that has faced harsh criticisms is the Judeo-Christian religion. Christianity is charged with destroying pagan animism, establishing 'man' as the ruler of creation and stressing salvation based on action, not on contemplation. All these beliefs and teachings eventually led to the conquering and exploitation of nature. Thus Christianity bears a "huge burden of guilt" (Hawkin, 1999: 66)⁶. But a closer look at its basic teachings shows how close Christianity is to nature. In the Old Testament, earth, water, fire, cloud, animals, wilderness, etc. were all part of the history of salvation. Coming to the New Testament, Jesus abundantly makes use of nature in his teachings and parables to explain the Kingdom of God that is central to his mission. Hinduism values a very intimate connection with the nonhuman world. Most of the important Hindu scriptures are closely related to nature. *The Ramayana* of Valmiki – the most ancient and glorious epic in the world – had its origin from a heart of pity and compassion for a wounded bird, which while sporting with its mate in love, was shot by a cruel hunter. Buddhism has the Bodhi tree at its center. In Jainism, a devout Jain monk sweeps the ground in front of him while walking to avoid stepping on insects. This can very well be interpreted either as scrupulous religiosity or as genuine compassion for the universe. For me, it is not the original teachings of religions but the interpretations of them that are at fault.

Religions, especially Judeo-Christian religion, might have had a negative influence on humans' attitude to nature. But religions have come a long way in understanding nature-human relation and their interconnectedness. I have come across very few ecopsychology writers who have recognized and acknowledged the role of religion in promoting the nature-human connection (there are exceptions: for example Macy's 1991 book looks at nature from the Buddhist perspective). The majority of them have remained very critical of religions. For me, excessively blaming religions for the present ecological crisis is unfair and unacceptable. There are many other factors that

⁵ In this context it is worth reading Guth (1995), who discusses the association of religion with environmentalism.

⁶ Hawkin refutes these charges, placed on Christianity by the medieval historian Lynn White. Hawkin's conclusion is that "we need a wider context than that of White's inquiry in order to examine the roots of the ecological crisis. This wider context... should take into account the rise of science, technology and capitalism and the dynamic relationship between them" (1999: 71). Also see Kay (1989).

contribute to the present brokenness of this universe such as “lack of information, faulty technique, or insensibility” (Shepard, 1995: 22). To a large extent, I feel, science, our consumption habits, the madness of cities, etc. are also responsible. But hardly anyone speaks about it. I do not deny that few authors – like Durning (1995), Glendinning (1995), and Kanner (1995a) – have highlighted the negative impact of science and industrial technology, but their focus is on the impact of science on human beings. Berry (2009) also makes a casual mention of the Darwinian principle of natural selection as a cause for the exploitation of the earth.

Ecocentrism

Movement from ‘anthropocentrism’ to ‘eco-centrism’ is another principle stressed by ecopsychology. It holds that the core of the mind is the ecological unconscious, and open access to the ecological unconscious is the path to sanity. But if we were to take this principle to the Maasai people of Kenya, I am sure it might not make much sense to them. In 2007, I had an opportunity to be with the Maasai people and to learn how ‘eco-conscious’ they were/are. The Maasai maintain a traditional pastoral life style. They depend mainly on cattle for livelihood. Maasai people seldom kill wild animals. Kenyan national parks offer tourists a first hand experience of wild life. For the Maasai people, land had belonged to everyone. They never knew what ‘land privatization’ meant until the non-Masai people divided their land and made boundaries. It was the madness of the modern industrial/scientific society that forced them to change their familiar eco-centric lifestyle to an anthropocentric life style, which is unfamiliar to them. I believe this might be the experience of many aboriginal people. The ecological unconscious was basic to people until modernity brought insanity.

The reconsideration of animism is another concept stressed by some ecopsychologists. In ecopsychology animism does not imply a mere “belief that imputes life or spirit to things that are truly inert” (Ingold, 2006: 10). To reconsider animism is to experience the world soul and to understand human existence as part of the web of life. It is to embrace our animal instincts and spirit. However, animism has been part of the basic worldview of many tribal communities. For them the nonhuman world is not something inert. One of the common expressions of this worldview is that tribal people across the world before drinking spill a few drops. It is their way of showing respect to mother earth who feeds them. In traditional Indian families people eat food squatting on the floor. The plate is kept on the floor. You are not supposed to lift the plate, but you bend down to eat. The meaning behind

this tradition is the same as mentioned earlier – showing respect to Mother Earth. In some parts of India people dance in the fields to placate mother earth for a good harvest and after the harvest they dance to express gratitude. There are many other tribal customs and traditions that express their interconnectedness with nature, such as giving rest to the land, not fishing when fish are pregnant with eggs, etc. Tribal cultures are filled with stories of nature-human relationship; the stories themselves are alive (see Abram, 2005). There are many tribes in India whose surnames are related to nature (Tribalzone, 2014). For them trees, stones, birds, rivers and sea creatures are living beings. These people experience a sort of mystical, emotional, reverential, ideological and genealogical relationship with the non-human world. This has been my experience, too. So, for me, and I am sure for the tribal people in the world also, the concept of ‘reconstructing’ animism is not novel.

Child development

The ecopsychology of child development (Barrows, 1995) is another principle stressed by some ecopsychologists. Childhood, the crucial stage of development of a person, is said to be the best time for creating the ecological ego. Not only the social but also the ecological context of one’s birth is taken into consideration (Barrows, 1995: 103). In an urbanized world, this principle is of utmost importance. For many urbanized children, first hand experience of animals and birds takes place in the zoo, with fish in the aquarium. These children need man-made water theme parks and swimming pools to get wet. They hardly have an opportunity to see the places where vegetables grow and trees bear fruit. In the name of ‘being hygienic’ they are grown ‘caged’ in the luxury of air-conditioned apartments. But I grew up in the countryside. My parents were farmers. They did not understand jargons like ‘social context’ and ‘ecological context’. But they gave me the opportunity to be in the ‘wild’. Animals and birds were my childhood friends. Mud, stones and sticks were my toys. I got wet in the rain and played in muddy waters. But still I remain very healthy. I grazed goats to meet my educational expenses. I helped my parents to cultivate vegetables and fruits. All these still remain as nostalgic memories. This might be the experience of all ‘rural’ kids.

Methodology

Another factor that denies ecopsychology the uniqueness it deserves is the absence of an appropriate methodology, as ecopsychology relies heavily on other disciplines for relevant theories and methodology (Hibbard, 2003: 42-3). There are many ways

suggested – ethical, experiential, philosophical, theological – to re-establish the broken nature-human relationship. The method based on experience is one of the widely accepted methodologies of ecopsychology. But all these ways are old and not unique to ecopsychology. It is a welcome sign that ecopsychology experts undertake various efforts to find a methodology that is most suitable for ecopsychology, with many considering phenomenology to be the best suited (Adams, 2005; Fisher, 2006). Andy Fisher, who considers ecopsychology as a project, mentions four tasks – psychological, philosophical, practical and critical – that ecopsychology should accomplish (Fisher, 2002: 7-23). But to accomplish these tasks, ecopsychology requires an appropriate methodology, and for that still more needs to be done.

Ecopsychological concepts are applied more and more in modern psychotherapeutic practices. For many, ecopsychology is “synthesizing ecology and psychology, placing human psychology in an ecological context, and mending the division between mind and nature, humans and Earth” (Fisher, 2002: 3-4) That is indeed a giant step towards healing not only the broken human non-human relation but also the brokenness that lies within every human. ‘Wilderness Therapy’ (Harper, 1995) and the ‘Vision Quest’ (Fisher, 2006: 161-4) need special mention: such practices base themselves on the experience that nature holds the potential to make us whole again. But approaching nature for healing is not unique to ecopsychology: “The use of nature to understand and heal the soul has an ancient lineage” (Kowalewski, 2004: 65) and “Nature heals’ is one of the oldest therapeutic dicta. Ecopsychologists (and ecotherapists) are finding new ways to apply that ancient insight” (Roszak, 1996). In major religious traditions people have always turned to nature for spiritual, mental and physical wholeness. Among the four stages of human life mentioned in Hinduism – *Brahmacharya* (Student), *Grihastha* (House holder), *Vanaprastha* (Hermit), *Sannyasa* (Wandering Ascetic) – the last two have a very close connection with nature. Tribal medical practices, even today depend on nature. *Ayurveda*, the Indian system of traditional medicine stresses the role of nature in the well being of humans (Frawley, 2001: Part I).

Conclusions

To conclude, the emergence of ecopsychology has helped many, especially in the developed Occident, to become more conscious of human-nature relationship and of the significance of the nonhuman environment for human psychological life. Ecopsychology has helped a lot of people to name many of the nature-human encounters which otherwise would remain nameless. But why does ecopsychology

lack universal appeal? Most of the ecopsychology experts are from the West, and they approach ecopsychology from the Western point of view. For the developed Occident, the concepts, methodology and application of ecopsychology may be unique. But for me and perhaps for many Orientals, the claimed uniqueness of ecopsychology remains questionable. Ecopsychology as a field of study can learn much from the experiences of cultures for whom there is no significant split between human and nature, and while attempts have been made in this direction they have mainly been from a Western perspective. I know that ecopsychology is still in its swaddling clothes, but to be universally acceptable and relevant, ecopsychology needs to present its contents, methodology and applications with more clarity. My criticisms are an invitation to ecopsychology spokespersons to catalyze that task.

References

- Abram, D. (2005). *Storytelling and wonder: On the rejuvenation of oral culture*. Accessed June 2013 from http://www.wildethics.org/essays/storytelling_and_wonder.html
- Adams, W.W. (2005). Ecopsychology and phenomenology: Toward a collaborative engagement. *Existential Analysis*, 16, 269-83.
- Barrows, A. (1995). "The ecopsychology of child development". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 101-110).
- Berry, T. (2009). *The sacred universe: Earth, spirituality, and religion in the twenty-first century*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, L.R. (1995). "Ecopsychology and the environmental revolution: An environmental forward". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: xiii-vi).
- Davis, J. (2006). *What is Ecopsychology?* Accessed June 2013 from <http://www.johnvdavis.com/ep/epdef.htm>
- Durning, A.T. (1995). "Are we happy yet?" In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 68-76).
- Fisher, A. (2002). *Radical ecopsychology: Psychology in the service of life*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Fisher, A. (2006). To praise again: Phenomenology and the project of ecopsychology. *Spring Journal*, 75, 153-74.
- Frawley, D. & Ranade, S. (2001). *Ayurveda: Nature's medicine*. Wisconsin: Lotus Press.
- Gebara, I. (2004). "The trinity and human experience: An ecofeminist approach". In R.S. Gottlieb (Ed.), *This sacred Earth: Religion, nature, environment (Second edition)* (pp. 400-411). New York: Routledge.
- Glendinning, C. (1995). "Technology, trauma, and the wild". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 41-54).
- Greenway, R.G. (2000). *The multiple approaches to ecopsychology: One view*. Accessed June 2013 from <http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/gatherings2/greenway.htm>
- Guth, J.L., Green, J.C., Kellstedt, L.A. & Smidt, C.E. (1995). Faith and the environment: Religious beliefs and attitudes on environmental policy. *American Journal of Political Science*, 39, 364-382.
- Harper, S. (1995). "The way of wilderness". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 183-200).
- Hawkin, D.J. (1999). The disenchantment of nature and Christianity's 'burden of guilt'. *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 55, 65-71.
- Hibbard, W. (2003). Ecopsychology: A review. *The Trumpeter*, 19, 23-58.
- Hillman, J. (1995). "A psyche the size of the Earth: A psychological forward". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: xvii-xxiii).

- Ingold, T. (2006). Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought. *Ethnos*, 71, 9-20.
- Kanner, A.D. & Gomes, M.E. (1995a). "The all-consuming self". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 77-91).
- Kay, J. (1989). Human dominion over nature in the Hebrew bible. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 79, 214-232.
- Kowalewski, D. (2004). Metaphysical tracking: The oldest ecopsychology. *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 23, 65-74.
- Macy, J. (1991). *World as lover, world as self*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Roszak, B. (1995a). "The spirit of goddess". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 288-300).
- Roszak, T. (1995b). "Where Psyche meets Gaia". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 1-17).
- Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E. & Kanner, A.D. (Eds.)(1995). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, healing the mind*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Roszak, T. (1996). *The Nature of Sanity*. Accessed June 2013 from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199601/the-nature-sanity>
- Schroll, M.A. (2007). Wrestling with Arne Naess: A chronicle of ecopsychology's origins. *The Trumpeter*, 23, 28-57.
- Scull, J. (2000). Let a thousand flowers bloom: A history of ecopsychology. *Gatherings: Seeing Ecopsychology, Winter Issue*. Accessed July 2013 from <http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/gatherings/history.htm>
- Scull, J. (2008). Ecopsychology: Where does it fit in psychology in 2009? *The Trumpeter*, 24, 68-85.
- Shepard, P. (1995). "Nature and madness". In Roszak, Gomes & Kanner (1995: 21-40).
- Tribalzone (2014). *Totemism*. Accessed December 2014 from <http://www.tribalzone.net/history/totems.htm>
- Washoe Tribe (2012). *WA SHE SHU: "The Washoe People", Past and Present*. Accessed December 2014 from <http://www.manataka.org/page1070.html>

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Yi-Jia Tsai (Fu Jen Catholic University), my instructor of Ecopsychology for her valuable suggestions, and to Fr. Daniel Bauer SVD for correcting the manuscript.

Correspondence

Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph
 Fu Jen Catholic University
 SVD Residence
 510, Zhong Zheng Road
 242, Xin Zhuang
 New Taipei City
 Taiwan

Email: jjinde@gmail.com