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## ECOPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND CRITICAL INTERVENTION

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Andy Fisher. *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*. New York: SUNY Press, 2002.

Shierry Weber Nicholzen. *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

In 1992, cultural historian Theodore Roszak published a book called *Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. Although not a psychologist, Roszak presented a clear and passionate call for the disparate spheres of psychology and environmental studies to come together in the service of environmental restoration and recovery. Roszak's central premise was that human exploitation and degradation of the natural environment is in effect pathological and demands psychological investigation. Perhaps more crucially, current environmental crises require that the personal and the planetary must connect (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). That is, we cannot separate out personal psychological practice from the larger environmental context in which we live. Although by no means the first person to make such claims, Roszak's work effectively launched the field of ecopsychology, beginning with the Institute of Ecopsychology at California State University–Hayward. As organizations, institutes, programs, Web sites, and conferences came into being, the task of defining and articulating exactly what is meant by *ecopsychology* and what it means to be a practicing ecopsychologist has been a slippery endeavour. For Roszak, ecopsychology perhaps was not so much a practice as a rallying call that human sanity is grounded in the natural world, and that the degradation and destruction of the natural environment needs to be seen through this psychologically informed lens.

Several years following the publication of Roszak's (1992) seminal text, the project and discipline of ecopsychology has dispersed along fault lines between academia and private practice, environmental spirituality and activism, philosophy and hands-on fieldwork. Specifically, ecopsychology has maintained a mostly experiential orientation, finding support among private psychotherapist practitioners and liberal studies programs. More often than not, ecopsychology as philosophy and practice has been relegated to workshop culture and often has a "getting-back-to-nature" ethos. Although there has been some nominal academic work devoted to ecopsychology, this work has for the most part lacked a critical-theoretical dimension.

It is in part as a response to this situation that Andy Fisher has published his ambitious book, *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*. Fisher,

a psychotherapist based in Canada, precisely and explicitly sets out to provide “both an introduction to ecopsychology and an attempt to encourage the field to become more comprehensive and critical” (p. xiii). What takes place is a rather breathless overview of ecopsychology’s core philosophical tenets and a platform for a new “radical” ecopsychology. To give his vision coherence, Fisher provides an extensive theoretical background to his concepts. As an academic, he takes great care to cover his conceptual bases thoroughly; at times the book comes across as a theoretical tour de force. As a proclaimed environmental advocate who wants his book to appeal to “students, psychologists, ecologists, environmental educators, philosophers, critical theorists, activists, and general readers” (p. xiii), he unpacks terms and provides signposts to readers when the going gets theoretically tough.

The book is organized into two parts—the first, “Groundwork,” and the second, “Nature and Experience.” The introduction to ecopsychology in the first 30 pages is a welcome survey of the central themes and trends in the field and an attempt to bring some coherence to a rather disconnected series of ideas and philosophies. In this section, Fisher provides a concise parsing out of the central tasks of ecopsychology and presents what he describes as its “four tasks.” In terms of getting a handle on what ecopsychology is about, this section is extremely valuable.

The central argument of ecopsychology, according to Fisher, is

that if we accept the ecological view that we are members of the biotic community, rather than its mere exploiters, then we may learn to recognize the natural world as a social and psychological field, just as we do the human community. (p. 5)

The force of the book, and ecopsychology’s potential contribution to the larger world of environmental thought and advocacy, is to help articulate—to give voice, and create a language for—the embedded aspect of humans in the larger natural environment. It is also to present a theory of *loss* that underpins the human severance from a constructive, healing, and respectful relationship with the natural world.

It is clear to see, therefore, how ecopsychology cannot be pinned down as any one “thing”—it is a critical intervention in the mainstream practice of psychology, an assertion of the emotional and affective dimensions of environmental degradation, a reading of human destruction of nature through the lens of “pathology,” an attempt to understand how humans relate and engage with the natural environment, and finally, an attempt to reconnect with the natural world. As Fisher states, “These tasks identify the common burdens that befall ecopsychologists, regardless of our particular orientations or vocabularies, for they derive from a historical moment we all share” (p. 6). To his credit, Fisher is attempting to bring coherence to a field of diversity.

The first task Fisher presents is the “psychological” task: “to acknowledge and better understand the human-nature relationship *as* a relationship” (p. 7):

Ecopsychology is a psychological undertaking that essentially says “we too are nature”. Its first task is therefore to describe the human psyche in a way that makes it *internal* to the natural world or that makes it a phenomenon of nature. Stated otherwise, the task is to build a psychology that expands the field of significant relationships to include other-than-human beings; a psychology that views all

psychological and spiritual matters in the light of our participation within the larger natural order. (p. 7)

In his view, what is needed is for humans to experience themselves as part of this larger biotic community, which has profound implications for the practice of psychology. Here, the emphasis throughout is on the *relational* and *participatory* aspects of the human-nature dialectic.

According to Fisher, the “philosophical” task of ecopsychology involves rejecting the “presumed dichotomies that underlie the modern enterprise, especially the human/nature and inner/outer splits . . . ecopsychology therefore has no choice but to undertake philosophical efforts that will give it a more adequate intellectual home” (p. 9). In search of this intellectual home, Fisher turns to phenomenology, specifically the work of David Abram and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, incorporating their emphasis upon relations, nondualist perception, and the primacy of experience.

It is perhaps what he calls the “practical” task of developing “therapeutic and recollective practices toward an ecological society” (p. 12) that ecopsychology has been most associated with for the past decade or so. This involves a “recollective” orientation that is entirely premised upon the need to “re-connect” with what has been lost—our bond with the natural world. As Fisher writes,

Recollective practices are those activities that aim more directly at recalling how our human psyches are embedded in and nurtured by the larger psyche of nature and at relearning the essentially human art of revering, giving back to, and maintain reciprocal relations with an animate natural world. (p. 13)

One example of such recollective practice takes the form of the “vision quest”—an increasing common activity in North America, borrowed from Native American cultures—in which a solo “quester” spends a certain amount of time alone in a wilderness area and engages in a ritualised encounter with “the forces of nature” (p. 13).

It is in the “critical” task that Fisher speaks directly to the criticisms that are often levelled at ecopsychology within the academy: He emphasises the need to bring together “the sorts of social and cultural criticism found among the more radical voices within both ecological and psychological circles” (p. 16). Ecopsychology has primarily been restricted to the therapeutic interpretation of psychological practice, which can be problematic if environmental issues are constituted by complex historical, social, and ideological factors. As he notes, the more socially critical elements rarely appear in what is considered ecopsychological work, and he asserts there is a “vital need for ecopsychology to become more thoroughly engaged in social analysis” (p. 17).

It is in the second half of the book where one may expect to find this critical and socially theoretical component, as Fisher outlines his theory of a “naturalistic psychology.” However, what is presented is a thorough investigation into how psychology can frame the human psyche as part of nature itself. Naturalistic psychology, which due to space limitations I cannot delve into more fully, is based upon his earlier points that humans are part of nature, and psychology must be accordingly nature centred. On the way there, we are taken through dense excursions into phenomenology, humanistic psychology, Buddhist thought, and environmental thinkers such as Paul Shepard, Gary Snyder, and John Livingston. His concluding critique of technological society and its links with human suffering is lucid, although

entirely tied to human subjectivity. The social-critical dimension is largely missing. This is surprising, given the psychological work (mostly in British and European schools of critical psychology) where the social and psychological dialectics are forged actively and with acute cultural sensitivity.<sup>1</sup>

It is ironic, then, that Shierry Weber NicholSEN's (2002) *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* takes a decidedly poetic approach to the topic of the human-nature relationship and environmental concern. As a former academic (NicholSEN has translated and written on Theodore Adorno and Jurgen Habermas) and practicing psychotherapist based in Seattle, one may expect this author to reflect the kind of critical engagement Fisher advocates in *Radical Ecopsychology*. However, what is encountered here is a meditation surrounding the central question, "How can the public mind relegate matters of the environment, which is the ground of our whole lives, to the periphery of concern, as though they were the private interest of a group called 'environmentalists'?" (p. 1). At the heart of this inquiry is human perception and the ability to "split off" our concern for nature from our ordinary experience of reality. She draws upon the works of poets (notably Kathleen Raine, Susan Griffin, and Rainer Maria Rilke), psychoanalysts, and nature writers and presents six chapters on themes such as silence, concern, perception and aesthetics, and apathy. The book reads as a gentle invocation and invites the reader to explore various dimensions of environmental concern. It is theoretically rigorous yet slowly paced.

Like Fisher, NicholSEN is a practicing psychotherapist, and as such it may not be surprising that she is primarily concerned with language and experience—two central dimensions of the "talking cure." In the opening chapter, "Many Silences," she explores how it comes to be that we rarely can utter words about that for which we care most strongly. She asks,

Why are we most reluctant to speak to what is most important to us? Because full speech exposes us fully. In speaking the fullness of our loves and fears we find ourselves suddenly outside the enclosure of privacy. This vulnerability lies at the root of our speechlessness. (p. 1)

What she explicates is the difficulty of putting into words the emotional content behind environmental discourse—the fears, grief, and intimate loves when it comes to the natural world. In addressing "muteness" when it comes to voicing concern over the natural world, she begins to unravel related questions involving what constitutes concern, the nature of shared responsibility, and perception. Her central premise is that we hide from our deepest feelings and responses to the natural world because we do not know how to express or hold these feelings.

What both NicholSEN and Fisher are primarily concerned with is the centrality of loss, pain, and suffering in relation to how we respond to environmental issues, degradation, and ecological destruction. Both take these themes as their point of departure and do not have the need to justify or defend this complicated tenet of ecopsychology. For Fisher, the question is how we can find collective ways to "bear our pain and suffering, to strengthen ourselves, so that we can then stop negating life and instead get back to it" (p. xix). For NicholSEN, she asserts the relationship between suffering, loss, and concern is tenable and draws upon psychoanalytic theories to demonstrate this:

The feelings of attachment and identification we develop early in our lives—the feelings that give rise to our sense of "home"—become the basis of our later

recognition of kinship. We know attachment and identification because we have experienced it; it is the matrix from which the self develops. But it is only by suffering the loss of those early bonds—and enduring the pain and destructiveness that were in any case bound up with the love in them—that we become able to feel concerned for what we love, a concern that includes the knowledge that we are also separate and responsible. (p. 35)

In exploring the love of nature and concern for life, NicholSEN asserts that “the natural world is part of the early home to which we bond and in which we form our selves, but it is also the unfamiliar world from which we distance ourselves” (p. 36). It is this in-between state, exploring the various modes of the human-nature dynamic, that forms the basis of both books. For Fisher, it is approached through an academic sprint through multiple theories and justifications; for NicholSEN, it is pieced together in a collage of questions and ideas contributed from a wide range of thinkers, poets, psychoanalysts, artists, and philosophers.

Central to NicholSEN’s project is the work of Wilfred Bion and his concept of “binocular vision.” This relates to the necessity to be aware of what is taking place in a group as a whole and what is taking place within one’s own participation, a bit like “participant-observation.” NicholSEN writes,

We cannot fully remove ourselves from our cultural perspective or from the perspective shaped within us by our language. But we can attempt to become aware of the phenomenological perspective of direct experience as well. In short, perhaps we can have a kind of binocular vision that would allow us to be aware of both our symbolizing capacity with its categorical frameworks and our more limited and embodied experience. (p. 170)

Turning to Bion’s concepts and related psychoanalytic theories such as Winnicott’s object-relations work, NicholSEN moves towards a similar mandate as Fisher, which is to help us contextualise ourselves, and our psychic structures, as part and parcel of the living, breathing environment. NicholSEN explores the modes of relating with the earth: through beauty/aesthetics, suffering and pain, dependence and exploitation, indifference and apathy. It is a rich discussion, holding tremendous rewards for those patient enough to understand the difficult psychoanalytic concepts she introduces. And like Fisher, she feels we must be able to experience and feel our loss and suffering in the face of ecological degradation if we are to be effectively responsive.

These books present much-needed insight and incorporation of the interrelationship of the psychological and environmental spheres; particularly for those in environmental studies, it is useful to be conversant with how psychological dimensions are inseparable from the social, political, and cultural dimensions. However, it is striking that both books, which aspire to be radical interventions in how we see the human-nature dialectic, remain largely in a therapeutic context. Most notably missing in the discussions of human degrading of the environment are the social, cultural, and ideological dimensions of human domination of nature. Indeed, power, ideology, and history are the three central spheres missing from these approaches. It is also striking that critical psychology, especially British and European, is absent from these works. Critical psychology needs ecopsychology, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

In ecopsychology’s lack of explicit engagement with advances in critical social psychology, it lacks the kind of critical rigour that Fisher calls for in his opening

pages. For all of Fisher's pleas for ecopsychology to become more critical, he ends up falling into the very therapeutic/recollective orientation he critiques earlier in his introduction by focusing on experience, the need to "reconnect" with ourselves as part of nature, and the need for support and safety to face difficult and painful emotions about our relationship with the degraded world.

Both of these authors exhibit extraordinary courage in speaking openly and plainly of their own passionate, emotional bonds with the natural environment and of their despair over loss by human destructiveness. There is risk taking involved in such acts: Fisher's book started out as a doctoral dissertation, and he has exhibited courage as a young academic and professional in his honest and vulnerable accounts in "coming out" as an ecopsychologist. Nichol森 has chosen to speak plainly and openly about the more affective and existential aspects of our concern for the natural world, which is far from socially or culturally acceptable. As Fisher and Nichol森 both illustrate beautifully, there is a profound braveness involved in speaking out on behalf of the natural environment. Let us hope the project of ecopsychology can continue to courageously challenge dominant psychological paradigms—and for a potentially *truly* radical ecopsychology that engages more explicitly with social critique and includes the social, the political, and issues of ideology.

### NOTES

1. Examples of this work include British psychologists Valerie Walkerdine, Michael Billig, and John Shotter, where subjectivity is brought into dialectical exchange with social, cultural, and political theory.

2. See Alexa Hepburn's (2003) commentary on the need to incorporate nature into critical social psychology in her book *An Introduction to Critical Social Psychology*.

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