

Living On Earth: Embodiment and Ecopsychology

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Our human project of living on earth seems to have reached a crisis point, one which may entail the collapse of large parts of the planet's ecosystem. Although we as a civilisation probably know how to avert this collapse, there is very little likelihood – although still some hope – that we are going to do so. We know how to do it technically speaking; but we don't seem to know how to mobilise our social energy in order to take the necessary steps. This illuminates the sense in which, from another point of view, our project has always already been in crisis: we have never known a good human way to live on earth. As Rilke says in the First Duino Elegy (my own translation),

Even the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in our interpreted world.

For every – perfectly true – story about indigenous people living in harmony with the environment, there is another perfectly true story about indigenous people destroying and laying waste to their environment. So far, it seems to be one of the things that we do; just as it is one of the things that locusts or volcanoes do. Unlike locusts or volcanoes, though, we have, at least in theory, the ability to choose to do otherwise. The fact that we do not collectively make this choice is the problem which ecopsychology tries to study.

What I want to do in this talk is to suggest that psychotherapy, in at least some of its forms, is already addressing this issue of finding a good human way to live on earth, a way to *be at home*, to live in a relationship of mutual support with our environment. 'Ecopsychology' is a name for a *conscious* attempt to do this, to apply therapeutic insights to this task. But the task, I think, is already implicit in what we do as therapists. I want to indicate in particular how this is true for the tradition of therapy to which I belong, body psychotherapy. So for some of you, I may be introducing two new things,

ecopsychology and body psychotherapy; for others, I may be making connections between two areas you already know about separately; for others, I may be connecting something known to something new. Hopefully all these different routes through what I am offering will be productive.

At its simplest, ecopsychology says that *where* we are affects *who* we are: environment influences psychological state. (Cf. Hamblin 2007.) Body psychotherapy points out that this influence happens largely through the effect of environment on embodiment. We can confirm this very easily through a simple experiment. I'd like you to close your eyes, and imagine that you are in a place where you feel very deeply at home, and surrounded by beauty. It might be a real place, or an imaginary one. Notice what changes in your body as you summon up this place: what happens to your breathing, your state of tension or relaxation, the amount of pleasure or unpleasure you are experiencing. Now imagine that you are in a place where you feel deeply *not* at home – somewhere jangly, unfriendly, toxic. Again, it might be real or imaginary. Notice how your body changes in response. Now come back to the first environment, the safe and beautiful one; then let your awareness come back into the here and now. Open your eyes, and take a couple of minutes to share your experience with a neighbour.

As I said, this is the simplest and most fundamental aspect of ecopsychology. Ecopsychology has three closely interrelated strands. The first of these, the one we have just touched on, is about the therapeutic effect of interacting with the nonhuman world, usually on an individual level: gardening,

walking the woods or hills, getting to know animals. Another focuses on how we can practically alter human-nonhuman interactions, and encourage humans to value and support the nonhuman rather than exploit and attack it. The third – which will be the main focus of this talk – explores the psychology and philosophy of human-nonhuman interaction.

Body psychotherapy, at least in the Reichian stream, is centrally concerned with two intertwined states: *relaxation* and *spontaneity*. It investigates – for each individual and for people in general – how these states can be supported and strengthened, and what interferes with them, how people learn to live in chronic tension and alienation from their organismic need to relax and express their impulses. In doing so, it constantly comes up against important elements of our culture which *demand* tension and alienation. We can look at these from many points of view – political, developmental, sociological – and I shall touch on some of these as I go on; but thinking about them philosophically, they involve a particular attitude towards what we generally call 'nature'.

We can see this operating, for example, in the field of ethics. The primary approach of Western society has been to establish a set of *principles* which we can then attempt to apply to (or impose on) situations. Usually, these principles are seen as transcending or even opposing what is natural – 'human nature', 'fallen nature' as Christianity called it. This basic mindset has been transferred from Christianity to more modern theories, down to the famously atheist Richard Dawkins, who ends *The Selfish Gene* by saying that 'We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators' (Dawkins 1989, 201) – we alone are capable of



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altruism. As John Gray (2007, 26) points out, this 'assumes a discontinuity between the biology of humans and other animals' which is completely non-Darwinian. As we shall see, this supposed break in continuity between us and other creatures is one of the fundamental issues here.

There is an alternative view that ethical behaviour is the *expression* rather than the contradiction of our naturalness: that humans will spontaneously act in an ethical way unless interfered with. Not only humans, but also other animals – there are many examples of empathic behaviour, for instance, in nonhuman species:

A female bonobo ... had captured a starling and been urged by her keeper to let it go; she climbed to the highest point of the highest tree in her enclosure, carefully unfolded

the bird's wings, and spread them wide open before trying to throw it out of the enclosure. When the bird fell short, the bonobo guarded it for a long period. (Gray, 2007, 28)

This belief in our spontaneously ethical nature was also held by Wilhelm Reich, the founder of body psychotherapy, who wrote that, beneath the layers of repression, humanity 'is an essentially honest, industrious, cooperative, loving, and, if motivated, rationally hating animal' (Reich 1975 [1933], 13). Reich believed in self-regulation on all levels, from the individual to the social and political: 'love, work and knowledge,' he wrote as his personal motto, 'are the wellsprings of life; they should also govern it'.

The most developed statement of such ideas that I know of is in Taoism, the 'Watercourse Way' (Watts, 1979), which identifies as the highest human achievement the capacity to be spontaneous in the sense that animals or clouds are spontaneous; to follow the path of least resistance like water. Hence Taoism praises the quality of *wu-wei*, non-action – not that one does not do anything, but that one does not *interfere* with things, including with oneself – does not force one's actions, rehearse them and measure them against an ideal standard.

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering.
(*Tao Te Ching*, Feng and English 1972, Section 48)

This has implications not only for the individual, but for social action:

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?
I do not believe it can be done.
(*Tao Te Ching*, *ibid*, Section 29)

If the universe cannot be improved by conscious intention, then our best path is humility and ordinariness:

Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom

And it will be a hundred times better for everyone.

(*Tao Te Ching*, *ibid*, Section 19)

The ethics that interest me, then, derive not from a set of abstract or revealed standards, but from an understanding of what human beings are: embodied creatures, domesticated wild animals with self-aware, symbolising brains, an unusual aspect of the natural order uniquely capable of experiencing the natural as *other*. All of these things are surely enormously important for thinking about a sustainable human ethics; many of them have been left out, it seems to me, from most previous attempts.

It has been suggested (Wadley and Martin 2000) that what we call 'the rise of civilisation' is actually a process of human *domestication*, helped by addiction to opiate-like substances found in grains and milks. 'Civilisation arose because reliable, on-demand availability of dietary opioids to individuals changed their behaviour, reducing aggression, and allowed them to become tolerant of sedentary life in crowded groups, to perform regular work, and to be more easily subjugated by rulers' (Wadley and Martin 2000, 6). So those with wheat and lactose intolerances may be the most physiologically liberated of us! - This domestication of human culture wrenches it out of communion with wild ecosystems, which are then in turn reshaped to satisfy the needs of domesticated humans. This process has continued with the use of further opioids and opiates, including symbolic

'opiates of the people' like religion and TV.

The domestication of human beings – facilitating our domination and control by collective social systems – involves our *disembodiment*; our alienation from direct experience of bodily emotions and impulses. Many Western ethical systems are essentially efforts to strengthen our domestication and weaken our embodiment, rather than the other way around. The reason for this, I suggest, is ultimately a *fear of spontaneity*. If spontaneity itself is perceived as dangerous, then spontaneous wisdom and goodness will never be given the chance to appear. Body psychotherapy has deeply explored this fear of spontaneity as it manifests in individuals during therapy; and discovered that it rests on a fear of loss of control. The ego, as it exists in Western culture at least, is functionally identical with a state of muscular tension which aims to control our bodily states and impulses. In fact we *can't* control our states and impulses, so we control their *expression*. And we identify our selves with that state of expressive control; so that to relax and open up to spontaneity appears as a loss of selfhood.

The personal-historical core of this identification with self-control is our experience of toilet training: our internalisation of the idea that our body contents are unacceptable, that we are *full of bad stuff*. Premature pressure to control our excretion forces us to tense the large muscles of our pelvis, thighs and abdomen; and this tension becomes bound up with our sense of all-rightness, of being a clean and proper person. Messiness of all kinds becomes labelled as bad and unacceptable. (Totton and Edmondson

1988, 72-4). But what could be messier than nature? – both the natural world in general, and our own organismic nature, are complex non-linear systems, rooted in chaos and chaotic state-shifts which are beyond rational control or prediction. From the point of view of the rigidly toilet-trained child, all this is messy, bad and intolerable.

Mainstream Western thought rests on a set of polarities: good-bad, mind-body, culture-nature, and so on. These polarities are aligned with each other, and turned sideways, so that one of each pair is seen as 'higher', more advanced, than the other. Hence we have, for example, the 'higher' set of mind, reason, culture, control, human, order; and the 'lower' set of body, emotion, nature, spontaneity, animal, chaos. It is fascinating to note how often, in body psychotherapy, clients identify what is spontaneously emerging in their body experience, with nonhuman creatures: apes, fishes, snakes, wolves, lions, mice, birds – all these beings and many more enter the therapeutic space once our fear of the spontaneous begins to relax and we can make room for mess. Recently a group participant talked about the 'werewolf' he had identified through his body experience, and whom he saw as wild, free, attractive and dangerously destructive. 'He is the slave of his instincts', he said, paradoxically equating spontaneity with lack of freedom – the sort of confusion which is bound to arise from this set of paired false equivalences. Many clients refer at some point to the sequence in the film *Alien* when the monster bursts out of someone's torso, a release of pent up rageful energy which is experienced as murderous.

We fear the nonhuman because we identify it with spontaneity. Hence we

relate to the world from an instrumental position: we seek to control it, to make it do what we want, in much the same way that we try to make our bodies do what we want. We seek to domesticate the world as we ourselves are domesticated. From this point of view, the relationship which relatively 'wild' indigenous cultures have with their environment is incomprehensible to us.

Mainstream culture has often perceived such societies as ignorant and incompetent. For example, 'slash-and-burn' has been the Western name given to shifting cultivation or 'swidden', the most common form of agriculture in the world's rain forests. As carried out by Western or westernised farmers, it is a major ecological problem, which destroys the soil and permanently eliminates rain forest from the areas where it is used. However, as practised by indigenous peoples, these methods can be efficient, subtle and sustainable.

The seminomadic Kayapo in the Amazon basin clear a forest plot by felling the largest central trees outwards, bringing smaller trees and brush down with them. While all this is baking in the sun they plant some of their root crops within this wheel of fallen trees and brush, and then slow-burn it so that the crops draw up the nutrients released as ash. Once the ashes have cooled, the rest of the root crops are planted; a week or so later, remaining twigs and branches are burnt in piles, and heavy-feeding crops like beans and squashes are planted in these ashes.

After a few seasons, the garden is left to revert to forest. It will be used for years as a permaculture plot, with some crops bearing for thirty or forty years, together with self-seeding successional plants like fruit trees, palms and

medicinal herbs, and berries that attract birds and wildlife for hunting. These gardens need no attention for months or years at a time. They give high yields for very little work – far more so than most Western agriculture – and actually *improve* the rainforest soil, in stark contrast to agribusiness.

On the savannah and grasslands where the Kayapo villages are situated are islands of forest known as *apete*. Anthropologists have long assumed them to be natural, and only recently realised that most are deliberately created, by building compost piles of branches and leaves, 'inoculating' them with bits of ant and termite nests, planting especially useful trees – and then *leaving the whole thing alone*. 'Besides serving as supermarkets, the islands are used as shelter in time of war or epidemic, as refuges from the midday sun, as studios for bodypainting, as playgrounds, and as motels for trusting lovers.' (Eisenberg, 311; all the above is from Eisenberg 308-11, drawing on Posey 1982, 1984.)

The Kayapo clearly don't plan how to farm in harmony with the local ecosystem – or not in the same sense that we plan. On the other hand this is not instinctual behaviour. Human beings don't *have* instinctual behaviour to any significant extent; the racist tendency to think of indigenous peoples as acting instinctively follows from the equation of primitive, natural and animal which I have already discussed. (Later during the Festival, someone referred to Ken Wilber's racist description of pre-individuated consciousness as 'tribal consciousness'.) The point is that it would never occur to the Kayapo, or to many other indigenous peoples, to farm or live *out of* harmony; because they experience themselves as *part* of the ecosystem, a self-aware part of it.

From this wild mind flows a detailed and precise understanding of how things work in that place – which they describe in terms of 'plant energies' needing precise mixing and balancing through complex patterns of cultivation.

This local, indigenous knowledge is completely specific to the ecosystem in which it arises. It is creative and experimental, constantly incorporating outside influences and inside innovations to meet new conditions. The times when it goes wrong – when tribal peoples live in ways that mirror, on a far smaller scale, the destructiveness of mainstream culture – seem to occur when their environment has changed faster than they can adapt, and they go on trying to apply traditional strategies (Johnson 1992). This speed of change is, of course, the constant condition of modernity. Even though traditional lifestyles may well be in many ways hugely preferable to ours, only if we would like to live in an unchanging and monolithic culture can we claim that indigenous cultures offer a satisfactory solution to how humans should live.

I don't want to set up a dualistic opposition between 'wild' and 'domesticated', where 'wildness' is idealised; nor to beat the drum for a return to hunter-gatherer-gardener culture (incidentally wiping out 99% of the human race). We cannot go back. But I want to indicate a possible way forward, by pointing out an aspect of human psychology which operates in *all* cultures and societies, and which we can call 'wild mind', as ecologists speak of 'wild ecosystems': undamaged, complex systems of interaction where each part supports and is supported by the whole. I will list four properties of wild mind, each of which has powerful

implications for therapy and counselling.

- Wild mind is spontaneous.
- Wild mind is co-creative.
- Wild mind is self-balancing.
- Wild mind is inherent wisdom.

We have already seen wild mind's quality of spontaneity. It follows from not resisting identification with the body, and through this with the body as an aspect or part of the whole system. Like an ecosystem, like our physiological functions, wild mind *happens of its own accord*, as the sum product of local reality: we do not have to bring purpose or intention to bear on the situation, as if from the outside – they arise as spontaneous expressions of the situational gestalt. When I experience myself making decisions, neural imaging shows that I have already 'made' that decision fractions of a second earlier – or rather, the decision has already made itself, since 'I' was not involved! (Libet 1985; see also Wegner 2002. Using research data for effect like this is of course cherry-picking, and a proper account would need far more space)

By 'co-creation', I refer to this way in which wild mind is the expression of the situational gestalt: the expression of how the entire universe operates as it comes to bear on this local moment. Hindu tradition speaks of 'Indra's net': a complex network of jewels, each reflecting all the other jewels within its facets. Co-creation is intimately bound up with self-balancing: just as, in a therapy session or a therapy group, each participant expresses a whole relational pattern of transference and countertransference; just as a local ecosystem balances itself through the giving and receiving of biochemical messages transmitted through the air and through the underground

mycorrhizal network (Buhner 2002); so wild mind is balanced in and with its whole environment, including the environment of other humans. Gregory Bateson shows that mind, like all complex systems (including mycorrhiza), operates through homeostatic loops, mechanisms for rebalancing the system whenever it goes out of equilibrium. For him, the processes which produce healing in organs, growth in organisms, development in societies, or balance in large ecosystems are *all minds* – aspects of 'that wider knowing which is the glue holding together the starfishes and sea anemones and redwood forests and human committees' (Bateson 1979, 3).

Humans, however, have developed a further level of abstraction from this homeostatic mentality: consciousness, which seems to privilege purpose, intention and separateness. 'Purposive consciousness pulls out, from the total mind, sequences which do not have the loop structure which is characteristic of the whole systemic structure' (Bateson 1973, 410). However, 'the part can never control the whole' (Bateson 1973, 413): the conscious mind's impression that it is in control of the bodymind is simply an illusion, and maintaining that illusion creates tremendous stress and anxiety.

Actually, *nothing* controls the bodymind: everything just happens of its own accord. Wild mind seeks constantly to communicate this reality to consciousness, as a rebalancing – through dreams, visions, slips, symptoms, psychoses and sudden enlightenment. It also expresses itself through 'ideomotor movement', the spontaneous and unconscious body expressions which accompany us through life. Barrett Dorko (<http://>

www.barrettdorko.com; see also Spitz 1997) argues that the constant disciplining and discouraging of these movements in children – ‘Stop fidgeting!’ – is responsible for a large proportion of bodily problems in adults: wild mind prevented from natural homeostatic re-balancing.

And the inherent wisdom of wild mind follows from and sums up all of these qualities. Embodiment relates directly to clear perception of the world, what Zen Buddhists call the polished mirror. The Sufi poet Kabir says

Something inside me has reached to the place
Where the world is breathing.
The flags we cannot see are flying there.
(Bly 1977, 52)

The founder of ecological psychology James J Gibson writes:

Ask yourself what it is you see hiding the surroundings as you look out upon the world – not darkness surely, not air, nothing but the ego’ (Gibson 1979, 112).

This links with a profound remark by W H Bates, the inventor of the Bates Method: ‘When the eyesight is normal, the mind is always perfectly at rest’. Relaxation and spontaneity are the foundations of wisdom. But sight should not be privileged over the other channels of experience: we make contact with our environment through all the senses, especially the intimate senses of touch, smell, taste, kinesthesia and proprioception.

Earlier I quoted Rilke’s lines about humans not being at home in the interpreted world – the world as it is passed through the filter of consciousness. Consciousness doesn’t intrinsically mean alienation; but it opens the way to it. An ‘interpreted world’ is

a world with two positions, myself and my environment. To avoid splitting this world in two, our awareness, our story of reality, needs to *include* our continuous act of interpretation. And this is after all what we do in sophisticated forms of relational therapy: we’re not seeking ‘reality’ at all, let alone seeking it across the abyss of interpretation, instead we’re taking the *whole* of what is going on, interpretation and all, projection, transference and counter-transference, as ‘reality’.

I am arguing, then, that psychotherapy, and body psychotherapy in particular, can be understood as a guardian and cultivator of wild mind, human ecological consciousness. Just like physical wilderness, wild mind can never be eliminated so long as life survives, though it can be impoverished, marginalised, reduced to a patch of scrub on a corner of waste ground, to dreams, involuntary twitches and slips of the tongue. Given the slightest opportunity, wilderness always renews itself: seeds sprout in the rubble, in a few years trees will grow up through abandoned stretches of tarmac. Wilderness is, in a sense, the *tendency to connect*, to become more complex; it is innate in all living systems, including ourselves.

Thoreau says: “In Wilderness is the preservation of the world” (‘Walking’, 1862).

Let me end with two quotations from Kabir, which I think bring together much of what I have been trying to say. He says:

Be strong then, and enter into your own body;
There you have a solid place for your feet.
Think about it carefully!
Don’t go off somewhere else!
(Bly 1977, 17)

And he also says:
We are all struggling; none of us
has gone far.
Let your arrogance go, and look
around inside.

The blue sky opens out further and
further,
the daily sense of failure goes
away,
the damage I have done to myself
fades,
a million suns come forward with
light
when I sit firmly in that world.
(Bly 1977, 57)

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