

Trees of knowledge, death and possible life: ancestral warnings of ecosystemic holocaust, its psycho-spiritual causes, and clues to resolution

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(Received 18 March 2015; accepted 21 May 2015)

Linking to the second-generation holocaust experience of the author, this article suggests that the human species has warned itself for millennia that we would eventually generate the current ecosystemic holocaust from consuming and assimilating planet Earth to ourselves. It explains the contradictory engine of this as rooted in an instinctive orientation towards growth and self-interest, in pursuit of well-being, satisfaction and meaningful life. The article explains the psycho-cultural reasons why, in the human species, this natural orientation ends up inverting ecological necessities, with catastrophic consequences. A traditional word for this dynamic is ‘idolatry’, self-worship. We have continued on this route, unwilling to hear ancestral warnings, in spite of our ability to do otherwise – to know that we are participants in a bigger contextual ecosystem on which we depend, to live meaningful lives by discerning our roles within this context, and behaving accordingly. So doing, we continue to destroy the bigger Body of which we are members, and on which we inescapably depend. The spiritual-religious traditions explain the causes and consequences of these two basic orientations to life – consumptive and contextualizing. The first points to the ‘klippotic’ ‘tree of death’, the second to the harmony of parts and the ‘Tree of Life’. The route to both is via the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, and whether life or death results depends upon how we choose to interpret our knowledge, and for what purpose, through our individual and collective free will. Ecological language and imagery were not available millennia ago, but other language was used to describe the functional versus dysfunctional psyche–ecology relationships, and to give clues to the psycho-spiritual evolution necessary for our species to discern our ‘membership role’ within the ecosystem, and to align our lives accordingly. It was also abused and distorted for idolatrous purposes. The article ends with contemporary examples of the two orientations, and a challenge to the reader.

Keywords: ecology; ecopsychology; holocaust; spirituality; Tree of Life; sustainability

This article picks up a theme from ‘Longing to be human’ (Maiteny, 2012): that spiritual-religious traditions have, for millennia, warned of the supreme contradiction that we humans would eventually generate an ecosystemic holocaust from consuming and assimilating planet Earth to ourselves, as a way of seeking a meaningful life. The traditional term for this orientation was ‘idolatry’, self-worship. Ecological language

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and imagery were not available millennia ago, but it is clear that questions of psycho-ecology relationship were at the heart of these messages. The traditions also give clues to the psycho-spiritual evolution necessary for our species to discern our 'membership role' within the ecosystem and to come into alignment as participants within it. We continue to ignore these analyses and guidance at our peril.

This is a subject close to my heart, and one that, for me, has involved both poetic-type and scientific-type engagement. Both these modes of knowing combine in conveying what I want to convey here, as this subject has been part of my life since childhood. It was at age six or seven that my bafflement and pain began; at how and why it is that one earthly species, on this one known planet that has evolved complex life, can be knowingly extinguishing fellow-species on a holocaustic scale, species that will never again be seen on Earth, or in the universe. Since then, the background 'inner atmosphere' of emotions such as grief, sadness, anguish, anger, dismay has deepened, not diminished. It can be a strain to live with.

I know the psychodynamic dimensions of it. I know that the ramifications of being the son of an Auschwitz survivor may have especially sensitized me to the ecological holocaust. But I also know this is not a complete explanation. My response to Beauty, its corruption and destruction is also significant in itself. I recognize in myself what Jerome Bernstein (2005) describes as 'borderland experience'. I have a deep felt sense of being part of, a *member* of, the ecosystem. As such, I/we can know, within our own first-hand experience, the pain, dis-integration, co-rupture of the ecosystem and the collective member-ship that constitutes it.

Many, if not all mystical-religious traditions say this very same thing, albeit in coded language. They also warn about not listening to this and, further, that humans are a species that can become the organ(s) through which the ecosystemic Body of Earth, materialization of the Divine, can know Itself. As the philosopher-mystic Petr Ouspensky (1950) emphasizes, the psychology of such human evolution is, however, a *possibility*, not an inevitability, and involves hard work. If it is not realized, however, the risk is not merely stasis or stagnation, but an accelerating regression into dysfunctional false 'membership' of the body, and degradation of the body itself.

'All in our image': turning the ecosystem upside-down

This maladaptive relationship to the 'bigger body', and therefore to ourselves, is generated by a golem-like 'reality' of our own cognitive and cultural creation. It is a world of our imagination(s), based on an inversion of necessary ecological principles, which suits our inflated instinctive drives, aided and abetted by our capacity to construct beliefs and technologies. It serves only ourselves. We live by and in this world, and firmly believe in its truthfulness. It is a world that spawns priorities and beliefs such as that the ecology can wait until the economy is on a firm footing (something that is evidently a 'waiting for Godot'-type aspiration), summed up in such claims as 'What's good for General Motors is good for America' (quoted by Rappaport, 1979, 1999).

In this inverted, imaginary world, the ecosystem and society – everything it seems – depends on the economy, on economic growth and, therefore, on fossil fuels. Like many dangerous and convincing seductions, it is a clever, though non-conscious, sleight of hand. It contains enough truth to convince. After all, we're no different from other species in being focused on our self-interest and our own growth. Nectar

is evolved 'by' the flower to seduce the bee into landing on it in a particular way so that its pollen will attach to the bee and so be taken to another flower. The flower is, non-consciously (at least as far as we know), solely 'concerned' with its own reproductive interest. Similarly, the worker bee is hard-wired to focus on collecting nectar for itself and its hive family, not with being a vector for pollination. The bee is not 'concerned' with the part it plays, with the flower, in cohering a healthy ecosystem. Hence the human frustration when they 'prefer' high-yielding Himalayan balsam, if it is available, to indigenous wildflower meadows, painstakingly and unselfishly nurtured in the interests of the bee and the wider habitat.

Organisms are, in ecological anthropologist Roy Rappaport's terms, 'special purpose systems'. The human species shares this orientation too. In non- (or pre-) human ecosystems, however, the self-interested urge to growth is constrained by ecological limiting factors, most importantly the amount of sunlight energy available as it is passed from one trophic (food) level to another – plants to herbivores to carnivores to detritivores, etc. Only about 10% is passed from one level to the next, hence food pyramids and why, for example, there are (and must be in a functional, sustainable system) more plants than antelope, and more antelope than lions on the African savannah.

An organism, grouping or species is dysfunctional – i.e. maladaptive, malignant, mal-aligned – when it damages the 'general purpose system' (Rappaport, 1979, 1999) of which it is part and on which it depends for its own survival. This happens, though, through excessive growth and prioritization of its own particular, self-orientated interests, its accumulation of whatever it can acquire to resource its own purposes.

The one species that has evolved the possibility of circumventing the limiting factor of sunlight availability – the 'barrier of the sun', to coin a phrase – is *Homo sapiens*, as I point out in 'Longing to be human' (Maiteny, 2012). With our sophisticated cleverness we have translated the urge for growth and self-interest that we share with other species into elaborate cultural forms such as wealth, power, status, branding and many others. Basic survival needs are not enough. The aim is now 'survival in style' (Shea, 2004), and there is, it seems, never enough of this. Our cleverness and beliefs are adept at camouflaging what is essentially an elaboration on the same basic, instinctual drives as something more evolved and 'civilized'. I like to refer to this use of cleverness as 'cleverage'.¹

In excess, this tendency to 'more-of-the-same-but-of-a-different-order' is profoundly dangerous – suicidal, in fact – for the system (or species) that destroys its environment destroys itself (Wilden, 1987). *Homo sapiens* has seduced itself into the delusion that the growth in consumption and population generated by our cognitive-cultural elaboration on survival, growth and reproductive instincts can go on forever. Unfortunately, like all delusions, there are very rational reasons why it cannot be self-sustaining.

We are the one species that has discovered how to access millions of times more sunlight energy than is available to any other species. Such growth is only possible thanks to that, and so long as it lasts. It is the fossilized sunlight extracted from fossil fuels. Only thanks to accessing the millions of times extra sunlight energy concentrated into fossil fuels (and before that trees and slaves) has it been possible for us to 'magically' invert the ecological food pyramid onto its precarious tip. It is as if we have turned the pyramid into a spinning top, placing ourselves at the inverted base. And now we have convinced ourselves that this is 'natural'. Sustaining

ourselves here, however, depends on our confidence and ability to keep the top spinning. Only by doing so is it possible for so many of us to exist and consume so much more than would be possible under natural conditions of non-fossilized sunlight. We have literally turned the world upside-down. Unfortunately, this can only be temporary. It is an illusion of our imaginations that we have come to 'need' to believe. But in the long run, it is an illusion that is impossible to sustain.

The tip-balancing illusion goes hand in hand, in a sort of mutually reinforcing circuit, with another delusion with which we seduce ourselves, and which suits our instincts of self-interest and growth. It magnifies the danger because it is a conviction that reinforces the 'need' to perpetuate the upside-down tip-balancing trick – the *belief* that all the 'others' – organisms, species, habitats, ecosystems, natural processes as a whole – have been placed at our disposal, only for our own purposes ... and 'God' has done this for us, the version that is today sometimes referred to as 'the supermarket God', the one that 'exists' to serve *humans*, to give *me* what I demand.

The practical impacts of this delusion that we are *not* part of the ecosystem, but that it exists for us, paradoxically proves that our inner psycho-cultural capacities *are*, in *fact*, part and parcel of the ecosystem. Everywhere on Earth now shows evidence of the impact of human behaviour and, therefore, of the inner, 'invisible' movers and motivators of that behaviour – psyche, beliefs and what we construct as being our priority *interests*. It is simply not logical to continue construing the ecosystem without these 'inner' constituents.

Dis-membering the ecosystemic body: warnings at the heart of mystical-religious tradition

Spiritual-religious traditions give mythically coded warnings about the destructiveness of this turning upside-down of the ecosystem, of its causes in human ego-centric motives and behaviours, and what we need to do to 'de-invert' it. Hebrew and Greek words translated into English as *sin* refer more to the deep sense of being misaligned, out of kilter (Gr *hamartia*: 'missing the mark') with the natural order (in the sense of *dharma* in Hindu/Buddhist traditions), than any human-constructed moralistic codes. Humans seem to be the only species in this condition. Other species, albeit non-consciously, do what they must do, and seem to have little or no choice but to align with ecological contexts, including the constraints these impose. The aim of mystical traditions for humans is to reach an equivalently aligned place, but consciously. This would be to realize that conscious aspect of the divine order referred to earlier, the Beauty of Harmony, a conscious, embodied (i.e. incarnate) expression of the One Source/Totality through the diverse parts generated out of Itself. Humans would sense ('hear') and wilfully take up the particular niche-within-the-whole that we have discerned as being 'right' – the mystical meaning of this being 'aligned with', as are the words 'just' and 'true'. A sense of what this means can be gleaned from closely observing an animal – a blackbird, a squirrel – and contemplating how oneself, as a person, might consciously arrive at such an authentic knowing of exactly what to do in the moment, here and now, in the equivalent way to how that animal does, but apparently spontaneously and non-consciously. How does that bird 'decide' what to do, what it does from one moment to the next? This is a question that fascinates me whenever I watch animals, and also people, including all our indecision and *mis*-takes.

Mystical Judaism – Kabbalistic and Chasidic – describes the disordering effects of humans. In these traditions, the ‘klippot/qliphoth’ (spellings vary) are ‘taints’ or ‘shells’ that humans cling to that divert us from realizing the possibility of alignment and, therefore, of realizing peace and harmony in life and world. They are the diabolical spheres or tendencies that are so seductive and clinging because they are deeply rooted in our evolutionary heritage, in the psycho-instinctual ‘DNA’ that all species share. Paradoxically, as described above, without the cognitive cleverness of humans – the *Knowledge* of (the Tree of) Good and Evil – other species remain in *harmonious* relationship with the bigger Body of which they are parts. It is impossible to know the extent to which they are *conscious* of this or not. Perhaps it doesn’t matter. What definitely does matter is that we *can* be conscious of being part of this bigger context, and that we *can* choose to find our meaning and purpose by taking up our sensed roles from within our ecosystemic niches, or as organs of this Body, in service to it, as participant Members of it. When we do, we are on the path to integrity and harmony. This is the mystical meaning of the ‘Good’ and of what kabbalists describe as the possible Return – from the unconscious fall into ego-centredness, which generates and perpetuates the inverted tree of death, to the conscious, conscience-guided and re-aligned Tree of Life. It is a Return in T.S. Eliot’s sense in *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from explorations
 And the end of our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

The almost invariable default choice we make, however, is not to do this but, conversely, to continue behaving towards context as if it exists solely for our unlimited, self-orientated growth and consumptive interests. In so doing, the dis-integrating, corruptive impacts also continue. And religion itself is distorted to perpetuate and justify such ego- and anthro-centrism, with those holding the mystical understandings branded ‘heretics’. So the message of religions is turned upside-down, too. Words such as ‘right’ are used in the sense of humans having the ‘right’ to exploit – inverting the logic that we are a species ‘chosen’ by the divine whole/ecosystem to be the conscious knower of wholeness within the ecosystem, we interpret ourselves as ‘chosen’ or ‘favoured’ in the sense that all creation/evolution is ‘provided’ for us to do with what we want. This distorts the relationships as described both by science and religion. Even in the scientific knowledge that we are doing so, we perpetuate this inversion, the klippotic diabolical lie, and its resulting dis-integration, commonly described with words such as ‘evil’ or ‘hell’ (see Puhl, 1951; Buber, 1952; de Rougemont, 1944; Rappaport, 1999 on ‘diabolical lies’; see also Trungpa, 1974 on spiritual materialism as Satanism).

In ‘Longing to be human’ I described the implications of a klippotic orientation:

Humans are reducing and simplifying ourselves and everything else on Earth (Totton, 2011). We achieve this suicidal feat by inverting the ecological order necessary to our existence so as to live instead in a fatal lie created by our own imaginations (Wilden, 1987). It is named a ‘diabolical lie’ by both cultural ecologists (Rappaport, 1999) and religious philosophers (Buber, 1952). Mystical Judaism considers it the egocentric and, therefore, diabolical (*Qliphothic*) adversary of the Tree of Life, that is, the tree of death.

We are using our species' distinct complexity, diversity, and richness to desolate effect.
(Maiteny, 2012, p. 55)

The *klippot* are the spheres or aspects of the tree of death, the de-monic and the diabolical. These words are, in turn, etymologically related to disunity, dualism, profound splitting. It is, perhaps, not coincidental that, in English, the word 'devil' is almost an anagram of 'de-live'. *Sephirot*, on the other hand, is Hebrew for the aspects of the Tree of Life, which equates with harmony-in-diversity, among the members of the whole. For millennia it has been pointed out to us that, in all that we do – we always have this basic choice to make – between the Tree of Life and the tree of death – and this based on our response to the tree of our knowledge of good and evil. Such is the power of the more unconscious urge over the more conscious one that the choice has been excruciatingly hard to hear.

Rabbi Alexandre Safran, drawing on Hebrew scripture, puts it this way (I have substituted 'the human species'/'*Homo sapiens*' for 'Man', and 'we'/'us'/'our' for 'he'/'him'/'his' in his phrasing):

The human is the creature with a hybrid nature, with a 'double face', 'imbued with both the spirit of good and the spirit of evil'. Indeed, the human species can be the image of the Whole because he has this double nature.

By a wrong egotistical use of the freedom granted to us, the human species brought about our original fall. We separated the elements which are complementary and should be united in love because they both came from the same source of life: *Homo sapiens* separated the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from the Tree of Life because we were only following our desires. This was how our existence as a moral being began, an existence full of profound tensions! (Safran, 1975, pp. 273–274)

These are the tensions between True Life and apparent/false life, between life living true to, i.e. aligned with, our necessary contextual, bigger, planetary Body, as Members within it, and false life, i.e. misaligned with context while using it to 'feel better', to obtain 'survival in style', while undermining necessary life-support ecosystems. To undermine them is to undermine our capacity to exist at all, so such an action, being suicidal, is scientifically illogical and absurd. Such a trajectory is impossible to continue in the long term, yet we still use scientific findings, skewed to justify this mythology of self-interest which, as already described, distorts the integrative-holistic teachings of mystical religion. And we call this 'development', literally 'unfolding', when its actual effects are imploding. It is oxymoronic to use the term 'development' for behaviour that undermines its own continuation, that is death rather than life-sustaining – suicidal.

Contemporary examples of the klippotic tree of death

Looking through my naturalist-cum-anthropologist lens, I find examples of these two choices almost wherever I look. It is frightening to see how much more prevalent are tree of death tendencies than Tree of Life. In the rest of this article, I shall give a few recent examples that have struck me, with some of my own annotation.

I sell here, Sir, what the whole world desires: POWER.

(Matthew Boulton, 1728–1809)

I can think of nothing else but this machine.

(James Watt, 1736–1819)

When I first spotted these quotations on a Bank of England £50 note, my heart sank into fatalistic feelings of foreboding, and the following thoughts: what a symbol, a talisman, this is of our predicament! How many people even see it? How very different from the wide-eyed marvelling of the child when I noticed the invisible web of nature holding all life together as one planet! Like all citizen-consumers of the UK economy (which has usurped ‘society’?), I am forced to collude in my own entrapment by weaving an invisible net formed by literally passing around these diabolical values, to use these symbols of what a deeply embedded norm our dysfunctional way of living has become. We generated a diabolical version of ‘ecosystem’ out of our desire for well-being – killing ourselves trying to feel better. What tremendous effort is needed to change this habit! It has become our god, a deeply idolatrous one that we worship with ‘the Devil’s sacrament’, as the priest-poet Anthony Duncan describes it:

The whole collection of criteria is false; possession of resources and of objects, and power over others and ‘things’, expressed in many different ways, is, for many, the sole criterion of successful living. And activity, for its own sake, is seen to validate a human life that cannot be authentic unless ‘busy’. Money, the Devil’s sacrament, is worshipped with intense devotion, and its inherent worthlessness, though patent, is denied because Truth revealed would bring their rotting edifice in ruins around their ears. (Duncan, 1999, p. 101)

The quotation chosen for the Bank of England £20 note is from the man whose ‘invisible hand’ has become the quasi-supernatural god-force of free-market capitalism, Adam Smith:

The division of labour in pin manufacturing: (and the great increase in the quantity of work that results).

(Adam Smith, 1723–1790)

This deliberate choice ignores many other possibilities, such as Smith’s own warnings about the consequences of untrammelled consumption. He suggests that to be wedded solely to this is to miss out on life:

A profitable speculation is presented as a public good because growth will stimulate demand, and everywhere diffuse comfort and improvement. No patriot or man of feeling could therefore oppose it.

(But) *the nature of this growth*, in opposition, for example, to older ideas such as cultivation, *is that it is at once undirected and infinitely self-generating in the endless demand for all the useless things in the world.*

(Adam Smith, quoted in Handy, n.d., p. 3; my italics)

Whatever Smith considered more *useful*, he clearly considers infinite growth and consumption to be limited in their capacity to generate ‘comfort and improvement’, and other useful things. He refers to ‘sympathy’ and ‘fellow-feeling’ as essential to a meaningful life. He was *not* totally wedded to the quantitatively productive side of human activity, as we could be forgiven for concluding from what is emphasized of his work today. One might reasonably ask if he has been misrepresented and distorted to justify particular interests that do emphasize the quantitative, the inverted, the diabolical.

The following quotations from two of London’s top public figures, the Mayor and the Bishop, offer a powerful contrast between the two modes I am presenting in this article:

London is to the billionaire as the jungles of Sumatra are to the orang-utan. ... And we’re proud of that. I mean we’re quite proud of it, I mean and let’s be clear, we have mixed feelings. ... And the argument that we make is that the presence of these exotic creatures, the billionaires, is *good for the whole ecosystem*, and they support by their billionaire activities, you know, asking people to bring the car around to the front of the hotel, or whatever they do, and, you know, going to ... you know that’s all, that adds to the economic activity in the city, as I’m sure you understand. (Boris Johnson, Freakonomics Radio, 2014; my italics)

Over the past few years ... Lent has been privatized, internalized and confined to a battle against our personal addictions. The focus has been ‘me’ and of course it is right to start by taking heed to ourselves and beginning the revolution at home. But the focus of the prophets is our relationships, yes, to the world within ourselves but also to our neighbours and to the earth itself. The Bible tells the story of a whole creation in which love is central and in which God commands justice and teaches wisdom to establish fruitful relationships.

The Bible is also realistic in discussing the threats to the harmony of creation. Shalom, the peace and well-being that is God’s intention, is disrupted by ignorance, injustice and making gods in our own image and worshipping them. The prophets call this idolatry and we think that it is not our problem because there is very little Moloch (i.e. idol) worship in the Square Mile. But in reality every human being seeks to shape the future by reference to some idea we regard as attractive or fearsome. Most of the time we are dominated by notions like money, status, glamour and idolatry of this kind is an ever present reality. *Ignorance and idolatry disrupts our connectedness to the web of life of which we are a part and substitutes a posture of dominance and exploitation.*

As this way of life gains a hold on us we consume the earth rather than contemplating and sharing it, tilling and repairing it. And the more we consume and acquire stuff the more our awareness of our intimate, loving relationship with all that is, is diminished.

A preparation for the new life begins when we realise that we shall not reach our goal by the path of more and more consumption. Lent is time for reducing consumption and artificial stimuli of all kinds. (Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, in Chartres, 2015; my italics)

I have reached my word limit for this article, but I hope I have managed to convey my main aim: to pick up and elaborate on two allusions made in ‘Longing to be human’: how the Klippot/Qliphoth/diabolical relate to the consuming mode of living and the human search for meaning- and purposefulness; and that the psycho-spiritual causes of the ecological holocaust have been known for millennia. So has what we must do to reverse it: to evolve ourselves in healing the Earth (subtitle of

‘Longing’). Forces deafening us to them are still extremely powerful, however. Given that words such as ‘ecosystem’ and images of planet Earth, and perhaps even the very concept of planet, were not available to our ancestral mystical writers, I have often wondered how they might have used them to communicate their messages, if they were writing today (see Maiteny, 2014). There is no doubt that they understood wholeness, and the ecological and existential/spiritual significance of experiencing ourselves as Members of a bigger contextual Body (for more on this see Maiteny, 2009, 2012).

Each of us can find illustrations of our own klippotic, destructive behaviour in our everyday lives. These are accumulating to critical mass, to tipping point. The direct aim of the eco-mysticism being considered here is not directly to ‘save the world’. This will be an outcome of developing our consciences, of knowing Self in context of the bigger Body and, as far as we can, discerning our membership Role within it. To what extent will we feel we have lived in trueness or in lies as we lie on our deathbeds? To change orientation from consuming mode to contextualizing mode in the way indicated by the mystics is, in my analysis, the key to generating adequate energy of desire to de-invert our tree of death trajectory. Until this becomes meaningful as a guide to life, we will remain convinced by the corruptive, false ecology of the inverted pyramid that we imagine and live by. Only then will the Tree of Life, the harmonious ecosystem, be able to manifest consciously through us. Attaining ecological sustainability is integrating Life-Work of real-life, real-world mysticism, and the world’s religious traditions, read in the way introduced here, provide us with guidance on what we need to do.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. Cleverage: a word that emerged spontaneously in conversation with Sarah Deco at the memorial day of our friend Chris Seeley. Gratitude to both.

Notes on contributor



Paul Maiteny: Since childhood, I’ve had two key questions: why are humans so cruel to each other and other species; and what is the true contribution of humans as members of the ecosystemic web? These questions have informed my working life – in ecological education and management, university-based and independent research in eco-anthropology, organizational behaviour, and private practice in psychotherapy, ecological counselling and spiritual accompaniment. I also teach psychotherapy research methods, education for sustainability (since 1996) and transpersonal ecopsychology on Masters degree programmes. I integrate scientific and mytho-religious ways in seeking to understand, and contribute to, how humans might discern our role(s) as members of an ecosystem seeking conscious self-expression.

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