

Book Review

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Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the service of life (2nd Edition). By Andy Fisher. (2013). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. ISBN13: 978-1-4384-4476-5; 407 pp.

The ecological crisis reveals the degree to which our modern civilization, having become deaf to the voice of the earth, has lost its mind and lost its way. We are not separate from the earth, nor have we ever been. The earth is our home and we ourselves are made of earth. We are creatures, part of a larger ongoing creation, part of the earth community. Our basic sanity as human beings is grounded in the natural world, of which we, as but one species, comprise only a small part. So long as our modern way of life fails to love and care for the only home we will ever have or ever know, we will remain out of alignment, out of balance with nature and with ourselves, violating our own human nature and the gift of life we have been given. Our inability to treat each other humanely and our inability to care for the earth are twin aspects of the same problem. Widespread abuse of non-human creatures and of the earth itself is founded on a wilful denial and distortion of our animal, creaturely nature. It seems we must learn over and over again the lesson that we cannot truly understand anything until we can also learn to love and care for it. Empathy is the dawn of understanding. Antipathy, by contrast, forecloses understanding as it reductively misrepresents everything we objectify and exploit, leaving in its wake a mere semblance or shadow of true being. Freud's "seduction theory" in which he suggested the traumatic origins of a wide spectrum of conversion reactions and psychosomatic symptoms, was originally proposed in three early papers presented in 1896 (Freud, 1896/1953; 1896/1962a; 1896/1962b). However, it is only within the last two decades that childhood abuse and trauma have finally gained widespread recognition and acceptance as a major cause of human suffering, profoundly implicated in the development of nearly every kind of psychopathology and psychological disorder. Many practitioners of psychotherapy begin life as young people who are particularly sensitive to situations of "power-over" and distressed by the abuse of one person at the hands of another and the suffering and loss that these situations create. A strong belief in the preciousness of life and the conservation of human potential is core to our practice. Too often, however, the scope of our concern is limited to the precious few human beings with whom we are able to meet regularly face to face. Too frequently, we turn away from recognizing the powerful forces of oppression and objectification that contribute to the suffering of the majority of people on the planet. In the calculus of a global economic system that practices exploitation without limits, human beings, like their non-human counterparts, are treated as "natural resources" awaiting profitable development. When all human beings are reduced to economic units, no one's personal life is safe. The exploitative fantasy of

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unlimited economic opportunity has captured the imagination of the so-called developed world, and we have debased ourselves chasing this dream.

Critical social theory identifies the links between the personal and the political, and counts the human cost of our alienated, inhumane social systems, whose dehumanized and dehumanizing violence is responsible for both ecological and human suffering. Eco-psychology and eco-psychotherapy explore the possibilities of recovery from this state of alienation. Here the focus shifts from the critique of ecogenocide or "ecocide" to a positive vision of recovery and the virtues and values that would power this recovery. It is not too late to heal the earth by developing a multitude of creative practices for the care and tending of the garden planet that would at the same time support human health and well-being.

The experience-based approach advocated by eco-psychology can be described as a philosophy of "plural realism". It begins with a phenomenological world that is given to us before being elaborated by us. In sensuous, immediate experience, self and world are conjoined. This is neither the "objective world" posited by the natural sciences nor a purely subjective or exclusively human psychological world. We all inhabit an immediately apprehensible phenomenological world that includes everything we think and feel, sense, perceive, remember, imagine, and intuit. Each of our psychological functions presupposes and implies a world, the world, of which we as mammals, social and communicative animals, are a natural part. This naturalistic approach is largely compatible with social constructionist ideas about language and culture, but broadens the scope of shared meanings to include pre-verbal and unconscious states of mind, grounding these in our embodied experience as living, physically corporeal beings. We are by nature capable of apprehending others' experiences and states of mind, body-to-body, through co-presence, as well as interpreting these through the intermediary words and images that help to create the astounding complexity of the inter-subjective world we share.

Andy Fischer describes the eco-psychological paradigm as composed of four strands: psychological, philosophical, practical, and critical. These generate four interrelated yet distinctive agendas: (1) to develop a naturalistic psychology, connecting the aims and limits of human nature to the aims and limits of nature at large, (2) to ground this psychology in an existential and phenomenological philosophy of plural realism, (3) to develop life-centred and life-affirming psychotherapeutic practices, attitudes, and activities, (4) to critique or critically analyse the life-negating tendencies of modern society and mainstream culture. Dialogue and debate in all four of these arenas is necessary and desirable. Eco-psychology grows in the dialectical moment or movement between the restorative project of awakening our hunger for a life-centred, life-affirming world, and the recollective project of identifying the life-denying aspects of modern society and grieving for what has already been lost.

Fisher critiques the rule of reason, contrasting reason with recollective and restorative wisdom. By virtue of its value neutrality, reason is without a rudder, incapable of determining its own destination. Reason would as readily build a weapon as develop a vaccine. What we recognize as wisdom is a values-based understanding that is much more faithful to our direct experience than any abstract reasoning. Wisdom and nature form a necessary unity. Wisdom consists of working with rather than against nature, recognizing and respecting the unique nature and context of all things, processes, and relationships, including human relatedness.

To live its values and achieve its aspirations, eco-psychology and eco-psychotherapy must overcome the dualistic assumptions of our modern age: subjectivity versus objectivity, inner world versus outer world, and human versus nature. The project of eco-psychology attempts to bring objectivity to the subject and subjectivity to the object, remaining experience-near, retaining the richness and diversity of subject-object being, and refraining from the violations and simplifications that have become an integral part of everyday modern existence. Fisher links hermeneutics, the interpretive speech that

discloses pre-understanding or the “unthought known” that underlies all knowledge, with rhetoric, the passionate speech that aims to inspire and persuade. These two have in common their embodied involvement in the actual world in which we find ourselves. The inter-subjective world is grounded in our co-existence and our experience of living in the world with others.

Eco-psychology and eco-psychotherapy offer a hermeneutic or interpretive lens that focuses on human-nature relationships, investigating and describing the lived experience of being embodied persons participating in the natural world, and the lived experience of spirituality and the life force that permeates human and non-human affairs. These investigations disclose a natural world that objective science simply cannot encompass. As Fisher describes it: “The phrase ‘human-nature relationship’ designates a kind of forgotten land, a zone of reality that is relatively hidden for most modern people” (p. xiv). By contrast, this zone comes vividly alive in the storytelling traditions of indigenous peoples, often replete with personified beings of all kinds, weaving a rich tapestry of myth and metaphor, moving fluently between the social and the natural world, helping to establish and fortify our kinship with all living beings. These stories are often mistaken for fiction but in fact they are studies in ontology, the appreciation of being. Their aim is not the singularity of scientific truth but the plurality of progressively better “tellings” of what life is like and is all about. In a similar vein, Fisher quotes Audre Lorde’s statement that “poetry is not a luxury”, making the point that a sensuous, embodied understanding of what kind of creature we actually are can help to guide and equip us so that we might appreciate and understand the ecological crisis more deeply and co-create a society and culture that will be enlivening rather than deadening; ethically sound, ecologically sustainable, post-capitalist, pragmatic, and practical.

Fisher’s book is a significant contribution to the field, pointing the way to a genuinely progressive, 21st century psychotherapy and helping to overcome an artificial and destructive division between the improvement of personal functioning at an individual level and the improvement of quality of life for the planet and earth community as a whole.

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