
THE ECOLOGICAL SELF: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ANTHROPOGENIC ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE[†]

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Abstract

If actions leading to large-scale harmful environmental change are made acceptable and thus possible by a view of the self as separate from the world, we may have to spell out models of the human psyche promoting a more caring attitude towards our surroundings. In this article one such model is described. The model builds upon the concept of the *ecological self*, proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, and differs in crucial respects from the conventional psychological model of the psyche. In addition to developing the concept of the ecological self, some principles for psychological development compatible with the concept are described. Also, historical changes in human views of the environment and of human-nature relations assumed to underlie the present situation, are briefly outlined.

Keywords: ecological self, environment, psychology, transpersonal

1. Introduction

The message of the latest IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report, tells us that there is now consensus among scientists that human activities, with a very high degree of probability, is the main cause behind global warming. In addition, it has long been known that we are facing a host of other alarming global environmental problems such as loss of rainforest, reduction of biological diversity and loss of agricultural soil. There is reason to believe that the present environmental changes are greater than at any other known point in human history.

In this situation, it is important to be aware that technological solutions are not likely to provide a sufficient basis for action within a short enough time span. However, if we reformulate solutions to environmental problems to be primarily a question of changing human perceptions, beliefs and behaviours, we may have a basis for action here and now. Of particular interest are the fields of

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environmental and transpersonal psychology, as they may provide important foundations for future efforts at changing both how we think and feel about the environment, as well as how we model the human psyche and its relation to the natural environment.

Below, I will discuss one possible psychological model of how we as humans may perceive our relation to the non-human environment. I will argue that the way we understand the human self and the human potential of psychological development, may be at the roots of the history of modern environmental problems, because what we do with the environment, in part at least, is made possible by how we view the relations between humans and nature. The model of the self that has dominated mainstream psychology is one of a self with a strong sense of being something else than or apart from the surroundings, from other people and other objects in the environment. This sense of a separate self is, in Western culture at least, taken as the proof of having reached maturity. However, if actions leading to large scale harmful environmental change are made acceptable and thus possible by a view of the self as separate from the world, we may have to spell out models of the human psyche promoting a more caring attitude towards our surroundings. I will thus describe one such model that in crucial respects differs from the conventional psychological model of the psyche. The core concept of this model is *the ecological self*, proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess [2]. In addition to developing the concept of the ecological self, I will also briefly line out some principles for psychological development compatible with the concept. Before doing so, in order to situate the model into the proper context, historical changes in human views of the environment and of human-nature relations, as outlined by the Norwegian philosopher Hjalmar Hegge, will be summarized [3]

In the **mythical age** (i.e. before the ascent of Greek philosophy), nature and humans appears to have been experienced as one single unit. Thus, external (physical) events, were somehow experienced in the same way as internal, psychological events. There was no distinction between inside and outside. Humans *identified* with nature and all things were perceived of as intimately connected, as one whole. Human action was evaluated according to the way it fitted into this wholeness.

In **antiquity** the mythical way of experience was abandoned, while a holistic view of the world and the place of humans in the world still prevailed. However, one saw the emergence of a view of nature as being two-sided - one inner, actively creative, and one outer, passive, material part through which the inner part could reveal itself. In turn, this prepared the ground for a split between humans and nature, and a presumed contradiction between 'inner' and 'outer' nature, which in late antiquity became polarized.

In the **medieval age** a view of the natural world as a principle counteracting the true and real world of ideas had taken hold. This prepared for, **after the Renaissance**, a view of nature as an object of human domination and control, together with a shift from understanding nature as alive and spiritual to seeing it as dead matter, as a thing, an object. Consequently, nature was

perceived as having less and less in common with humans. The Judeo-Christian idea of God as the creator of the Universe and the distinguished position reserved for humans contributed to this human-nature dualism. The scientific revolution only served to reinforce this tendency which still prevails, although a 'new ecological paradigm' appears to be gaining support.

2. Environmental psychology

Turning now to the field of *Environmental psychology*, humans may be seen to experience the physical environment through at least four different modes [4]:

- **as external, physical location.** Developmental psychology tells us that the experience of an autonomous self, separate from the surroundings, is a requirement for functioning in the world. The scientific tradition as well as every scientist's tasks and experiences are examples of this mode of environmental experience.
- **as social system.** In this mode, social relations would form the most salient and perhaps only elements of environmental experience. In most cases, social scientists still define the environment as a social system quite similar to the way the natural scientist defines an external, physical system.
- **as emotional territory,** as when the environment is experienced exclusively in terms of emotions and associations.
- **as a setting for action.** In this case the environment is perceived exclusively or primarily as a setting where action takes place. Here, the environment will be analogous to a stage, and it would only be important because it makes it possible for actors to perform their roles.
- **as self.** The mode of environmental experience most distant from the experience of the traditional scientist is the mystical experience. Although the extreme version of this mode is uncommon in western experience, people do quite often experience certain environments as important parts of themselves, as integrated parts of their self-identity. In this mode, the environment is no longer something that can easily be detached from the person, because the detachment itself turns the person into something else. Also, changes in the environment would be perceived as changes in the self. This latter mode of environmental experience is the focus of the remainder of this article.

3. The ecological self

The ecological self may be contrasted with a more common three-partite understanding of the self, going back to Freud, and consisting of the 'desiring-impulsive self' (id), the 'rationalizing- decision-making self' (ego) and the 'normative-judgmental' self (superego) [5]. This view refers to narrow, particle-like views of the self. The two first parts of the self both appear occupied with self-interest, while the latter is preoccupied with the satisfaction of idealistic or

moralistic standards or norms. However, also those moral demands originates from an assumption of a narrow self because moral demands presupposes a self that is the centre of voluntary activity. It is possible to imagine our self as being more than merely a centre for voluntary action. It should be noted, though, that any attempt at realizing an expansive, 'transpersonal' understanding of the self by means of moral demands is not going to be productive because moral demands are directed towards and thus reinforce the particle-like self, a self that is perceived as bounded and apart from the environment. *Transpersonal* means literally 'beyond the personal'. *Transpersonal psychology* is by some authors defined as the study of human development beyond the ego [6]. This self appears to be the product of a culture -ours- with little understanding for how environmental change affects the self.

One basic assumption inherent in this model of the self is that environments can be experienced as integrated parts of self-identity through a process of identification. The nature of this identification will be described below. Moreover, drawing mainly upon the work of the *transpersonal psychologist* Ken Wilber [7], I will outline how different stages or levels of psychological development can be characterized by what the individual typically identifies with.

The ecological self is here to be conceived of as broad, field-like or expansive, in fact, it is assumed to be as expansive as our identifications. The self is simply defined as *whatever the person identifies with*. In principle, there are no limitations to the comprehensiveness of identifications; the approach thus suggests the potential of a sense of self characterized by an identification with "the larger collective of all living things" [8]. The hypothesis would for example be that if one identifies with (i.e. perceives oneself as an integrated part of) the Earth as a whole, the self would be experienced as equally comprehensive. Thus, in transpersonal and ecological visions the self is wide, expansive and field-like to begin with, and the consequence of this view is that (provided one is not self-destructive) one will naturally (i.e., spontaneously) protect the natural (spontaneous) unfolding of this expansive self (i.e. the ecosphere, the cosmos). One is supposed to exhibit the same degree of care for the environment as for oneself, thus, a threat towards the environment is perceived as a threat against the self.

It is important to emphasize that the concept of *identification* here is to be understood not only as *similarity* with some entity, but also as a sense of commonality [5]. However, it should not be confused with being *identical* with some other entity. What is important is the experience that through the process of identification, your sense of self can be expanded to include, for example, a tree while at the same time the person and the tree remains physically separate. Indeed, a realistic appreciation of how we are intimately connected with the world around us is assumed to inevitably lead to wider and deeper identification and consequently to the realization of a more expansive sense of self. The underlying assumption here is that the knowledge we can find in modern Ecology - because it demonstrates our dependency upon the biosphere as a

whole - may lead to an incorporation of the biosphere into our sense of self. However, Ecology in the narrow sense as the study of interrelationships among non-human organisms and their environments probably is not sufficient to bring about a fundamental change in our view of nature. On the other hand, if this perspective is used with self-reference, that is, "putting the person into the equation", it will require a genuinely new view of humankind and nature. If we regard humankind and nature as one matrix, instead of regarding them as separate, it will become clear that we are a part of nature [9]. The moment, the implications of the fields of evolution and Ecology are internalized, the result should be identification with all forms of life. Thus, to use an example from the eco-philosopher John Seed, "I protect the rainforest" will develop into "I am that part of the rainforest that protects itself. I am that part of the rainforest that recently developed thinking" [10].

This form of identification is what Warwick Fox [5] describes as the result of a psychological expansion of the sense of self from isolated ego, through identification with humankind to identification with the biosphere [11]. The realization of this sense of self starts when we cease to understand ourselves as isolated, narrow and competing egos and begin to identify with other humans such as family and friends and continue to the whole human species. In order to include the global level the requirement is that this identification goes beyond humankind to include the non-human world [12].

4. The possibility of development beyond the ego

Transpersonal psychology is a new sub-discipline of Psychology resulting from a common perception among a group of psychologists that the dominating psychological theories appeared too narrow to do justice to the full human potential [13]. Transpersonal psychology represents a view of human nature and psychological development where health and well-being are assumed to depend upon a balanced integration of physical, emotional, mental, existential and ego-transcending aspects of humans [14]. The field, defined as the study of human development beyond the ego [6, page], implies expanding the field of Psychology into a study of the whole person, including self-transcending growth [15]. One basic assumption of transpersonal psychology is that humans are situated within a network of mutually dependent relations with each other and the natural environment. Thus, any attempt at improving human conditions must consider global, social and environmental issues. This is very much in accord with basic assumptions of Environmental psychology. The theory of the ecological self does not provide any details on the developmental process or the processes by which the self comes to identify with the environment. However, the transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber provides a description of expanding identifications as a process of psychological development including possible development beyond 'the integrated ego' [7].

A basic assumption made by Wilber is that the human psyche can be understood in terms of hierarchies structured as wholes within larger wholes, from simple and rudimentary to complex and comprehensive. This also happens to be a general conclusion that can be drawn from mainstream developmental psychology. Wilber argues that during psychological development, the whole at one level of development will be part of the whole at the next level. He suggests thus that various theories within modern developmental psychology can be seen as descriptions of different aspects and levels of this increasing complexity and integration.

An important general question for Wilber is whether the 'integrated ego' or 'autonomous individual' is the highest possible stage of individual development. He points out that the very few psychologists and philosophers having examined the issue have suggested that great mystics and wise persons appear to represent these presumably highest stages of development. It should be noted here that Wilber's strong inclination towards hierarchical thinking, with 'higher level, more complex' meaning better and more valuable, may be questioned. Alternatively, one could restrict oneself to assuming different directions that psychological development can take, and that for example, in western culture, the integrated, autonomous ego is a typical result. In traditional oriental cultures a more typical outcome would perhaps be the experience of less clear boundaries between environment and self.

Wilber describes the general process of psychological development in the following manner:

At each stage a higher order structure emerges. This structure is more complex and thus more unified than the earlier lower order level. This higher order structure is introduced into consciousness, with the result that the self identifies with the emerging structure. Development can thus be characterized as transcending and integrating lower order structures into higher, more comprehensive levels. To give an example: As the body is separated from its fusion with the surroundings, this results in consciousness in the form of a body-self, identified with the body. The body ego thus transcends, first, an original primitive state, and second, it transcends the environment, making it possible to act upon it. When speech development starts, a transition from a body-self into a syntactic self occurs. This leads to a partial liberation from the drive principle of the body-ego, and development of an ability to anticipate events, as well as the ability to plan and delay of gratification. In Piaget's terms this is the concrete-operational stage of cognitive development. The next stage occurs when the child starts to transcend the thought process itself and becomes able to influence it (i.e., the stage of formal operations according to Piaget). Now the individual is able to transcend the verbal, and can be characterized as trans-verbal. At this level consciousness no longer identifies with any one of the former levels, so that they can all be integrated into a higher order holistic integration

To summarize, the principle assumed by Wilber is that once a higher order structure emerges, the self will gradually identify with this structure. However, in the course of the developmental process, each level will be separated from the sense of self. The self will disidentify or become detached from an exclusive identification with one single structure in order to be able to identify with the next, higher order structure. Because the self is separated from a lower order structure, it transcends this structure and is thus able to act upon it with the tools the newly emerged structure. For example, once the body-self is separated from the environment, it is able to act upon the environment with the tools of the body self (muscles). When the ego ('I') is separated from the body, it will in turn be able to act upon the body and the world with the tools of the ego, which are concepts and syntax. This view also includes that all previous levels of development can become integrated into consciousness, and that development is assumed to continue until complete integration is achieved. According to Wilber, then, the process of psychological development is characterized by identification, disidentification and integration, and is to be understood as an ongoing process of transcendence.

5. Concluding remarks

In mainstream western Psychology, what would be equivalent to Piaget's stage of formal-operational thinking is supposed to be the highest level of cognitive development. However, Wilber finds support in both eastern and western mystery traditions for the existence of higher levels of development. Wilber describes the outcome of such further levels as an experience of a final wholeness, in which the world process is experienced similar to one's own existence. This stage is seen as a complete integration in which the individual identifies with all things and events, even though these are fully understood as separate from the self. This final level would also imply a radical integration of all previous levels. This appears to be almost identical with the most expansive state of Naess' and Fox' 'ecological self'.

There does not appear to be any direct empirical evidence available related to the theory of the ecological self or Wilber's developmental model. However, there is some indirect evidence to be found. For example, the possibility for identifying with global environmental conditions or the biosphere, is touched upon in a few studies suggesting a relation between the experience of unity with the physical environment broadly speaking and (a) so-called transpersonal, ego-transcending experiences, and (b) level of personality development. For example, a relation has been found between 'harmony-with-nature' - values and a level of personality development characterized by openness for the transpersonal dimension [16]. The same or a similar process may be underlying both matters. A common denominator here appears to be an ability to liberate oneself from one's ordinary ego-identity and to experience oneself as part of something bigger.

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