Nature and Self—An Ambivalent Attachment?

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Abstract

This article explores how our attachment to nature is formed in our early love relationships and draws on ideas from psychodynamic theory and contemporary research in developmental psychology to explore the development of the self, the importance of attachment, how "splits" have formed between self and nature as a protection against vulnerability, and potential ways forward in dealing with this. The article argues that at the heart of our current ecological crisis are fundamental problems of dependency and vulnerability, resulting for many in an ambivalent attachment to nature. Understanding the complex ways in which humans react to intimacy as a result of early attachment is central to the project of ecopsychology and the ways in which people can help understand and shift the nature of their relationships, both to the planet and with each other. The article concludes by looking at evidence for a securely attached "ecological self" and the potential for developmental models to promote this.

Links Between Person and Planet

My aim in writing this article is to propose that our love for nature and concern for the planet is intrinsically tied up with our early love relationships. Our current societal ambivalence toward nature is being sorely challenged; to acknowledge our dependency on nature is central in solving aspects of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves. From the perspective of psychodynamic theory, I will explore how the "self" is formed in early attachment to caregivers and how good attachment is central to emotional health and well-being. I will then explore how by incorporating nature into a broader system of attachment relationships it can play a central role in helping us to regulate our emotional worlds. I will explore the problem of the "split" between nature and psyche and consider why such splits form in relation to vulnerability and poor early experience. Finally I will suggest how we can heal some of these splits and foster stronger attachments to nature.

In using psychodynamic ideas to illustrate the points I am making, I will go straight to the issue of anthropocentrism in my argument. A critique of my argument is that it is fundamentally anthropocentric, seeing human relatedness as the central concern in relation to our environmental crisis. There is a danger in linking psychodynamic thought with ecopsychology; all relationships, including those with nature, can be reduced to parental imagos. I would argue there has to be a movement between the intrapsychic understanding of the development of self and then how this self goes about forming object relationships, particularly with the environment. It is not nature itself that needs therapy, rather the humans who inhabit it. There is a growing body of evidence and argument that natural environments do much better without human interference (Mabey, 2008; McKibben, 1990; Terborgh, 1999). The issue of human dependency and how this becomes enacted in our relationship to nature needs to be addressed. We need to understand how complicated patterns of dependency and intimacy are constructed by humans in relation to one another and how, subsequently, these become manifest in our relationship to nature.

As far back as 1960, Harold Searles proposed that, although essential psychodynamic concepts were contained within Freud's writings, Freud failed, as have others since, to explicitly acknowledge the significance of the nonhuman environment in the development of human psychological life (Searles, 1960). Later writers in ecopsychology have further attempted to elaborate Freud's concepts. Roszak (1995) posited that the core of the mind is the ecological unconscious, where repression of the cosmic consciousness of man's evolutionary relationship to nature is repressed in an act

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of collusive madness that results in the industrialized society. As the original goal of psychotherapy was to awaken the unconscious, for Roszak the therapeutic goal of ecopsychology is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within the ecological unconscious, healing the alienation of person and planet.

Though I agree with Roszak's project for ecopsychology, I propose we have to understand the human-to-human dimensions of our crisis because they are intrinsically linked to the planetary crisis. The issue of interdependence is at the heart of the growing awareness of the current planetary crisis: We need to understand the human complexities of dependency and intimacy to understand the difficulties in our relationship to the environment. I intend to start with some very human concerns and make attempts to link these into problems of attachment to the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996).

Development of Self in Contemporary Psychology

My starting point is recent trends in developmental psychology that have been informing psychotherapy practice. The developmental process for human beings follows three main aspects that the human infant needs to negotiate: (1) encountering and realizing that it has a "self," (2) the growing realization that this self exists in relation to others, and (3) realizing that this concept of self and others can then be expanded to include a relationship with the wider world. In forming and developing a self the infant must negotiate issues of dependence and independence. Winnicott (1986) proposed that the baby moves from absolute dependence to relative independence to independence, via the facilitating environment with the caregiver. The early experience for the infant is a state of subjective oneness with the world and an undifferentiated sense of self. This movement between dependence and independence, toward a mature state of dependence is described by Searles (1960) both in relation to the mother and what Searles terms the *nonhuman environment*:

> The human being is engaged, throughout his lifespan, in an unceasing struggle to differentiate himself increasingly fully, not only from his human, but also from his nonhuman environment, while developing, in proportion as he succeeds in these differentiations, an increasingly meaningful relatedness with the latter environment as well as with his fellow human beings. (p. 30)

There has been a convincing argument based on sound research that babies grow their own minds in relation to the primary caregiver (Gerhardt, 2004; Schore, 2001, 2003; Stern, 1985). Schore (2001) focused on infant attachment and the primary caregiver's psychobiological regulation of the infant's limbic system as it matures and how this is closely related to the infant's autonomic nervous system in the form of an ability to cope with stress, proposing that the attachment relationship is central to helping the infant cope with stress. The ability to regulate our emotional world and maintain good mental health from this perspective is intrinsically linked to attachment in early infancy. The capacity to experience union with another and, therefore, a felt sense of attachment to nature (Fisher, 2002), results from early positive experience of the self-being with another (Stern, 1985). Without this fundamental, positive, early experience and the development of the capacity to relate, meaningful attachments are difficult to form.

The Importance of Attachment in the Development of Self

Attachment theory places the role of mother (or caregiver) as central to the infant's developing sense of sense and emotional stability (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Main, 2000; Stern, 1985). Bowlby's original research into attachment has achieved worldwide recognition (Bowlby, 1969); he proposed that we develop internal working models of attachment, ranging from secure to insecure, the subsets of which are avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized. Ainsworth developed these ideas further subjecting them to experimental research, developing the strange-situation experiment. The experiment looked at how an infant dealt with separation from their caregiver while in the presence of a stranger and how attachment behavior—secure, insecure, and avoidant—could be seen in the infant's responses (Ainsworth, 1978).

If we see attachment as manifest in patterns of behavior then we can explore how aspects of internal working models can be applied to relationships with nature. I will outline aspects of internal working models as defined by Main (2000). Securely attached individuals find it relatively easy to get close to others and are comfortable depending on people and having an interdependent relationship: They don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to them. Those with avoidant attachment patterns are somewhat uncomfortable being close to others: They find it difficult to trust others completely and have difficulty to allow themselves to be dependent. The third style is anxious/ambivalent; those who find that others are reluctant to get as close as they would like, and they often worry that their partner doesn't really love them or want to stay with them.

In some sense the dominant attachment pattern that industrialized societies have to nature is one of avoidance and ambivalence. Searles (1960) made a similar point, seeing relatedness to the nonhuman environment as one of the transcendentally important facts of human living, and the ambivalence we feel towards it, in the way we ignore its importance to us, as the source of problems in psychological wellbeing (p. 6).

Shepard (1995) in his treatise "Nature and Madness" argued that most of us fail to become as mature as we could be and that we act on primitive fears and fantasies located in our unconscious world that drives our relationships both with each other and to the planet. In terms of development, Shepard argues that the shape of all otherness grows out of the maternal relationship. However, similar to Searles, he proposes that this relationship is formed within the backdrop of the environment that exists for both infant and mother. In the evolution of humankind this setting took the form of living plants, wild birds, rain, wind, mud and the taste and texture of earth, and bark, the sounds of animals and insects. These surroundings were swallowed, internalized, incorporated as the self (p. 27). In terms of modern society, development for Shepard takes the form of an "ontogenetic" crippling, adolescent narcissism, oedipal fears, ambivalence, and inconsistency, all of which are projected out onto the environment. This historical march away from nature results in these private nightmares manifesting in broken climates and technologies that pursue an infantile sense of mastery, the upshot of which is ever-worsening problems.

These ideas are central to psychoanalysis (and latterly aspects of attachment theory), which explains why the idea of dependency on the planet is so threatening to aspects of our sense of self. If complicated dependency issues are set up in infancy with the primary caregiver, these cannot help but become manifest in our relationship to the planet and nature. In this way, an understanding of the human problem of need and dependency can help us more fully understand why we are in the current environmental mess and have developed an insecure, avoidant, and ambivalent relationship to nature and the planet.

The Importance of Attachment in Emotional Regulation

The current environmental crisis powerfully reminds us of is the fact that we are in relationship to the more-than-human world and that facets of this relationship are central to our concepts of self and the process of emotional regulation.

The idea of secure base is very important in attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). If we posit aspects of nature as both a maternal and paternal presence in our lives, a recent example can illustrate just how aspects of our well-being become intrinsically linked to natural environments. It is a quote from Roger Deakin (2008), the British naturalist, on the death of his father:

> The day a policeman came to the door and told me my father had died might actually have been the moment that made me into a conservationist. I had lost such a big part of my life that I needed to compensate by holding on tightly to everything else. This may be the source of my passion for conservation. (p. 47)

From this perspective, nature can be seen as representing a secure base, an aspect of both our internal and external relational world that can provide great comfort.

Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, and Target (2002) presented us with the idea of affect regulation, a process whereby the individual is able to maintain a regulatory position in relation to his or her own mood states, maximizing positive and minimizing negative mood states. This capacity is intrinsically linked to good attachments formed in early infancy that help the infant to regulate its own emotional mood states. I think there is strong evidence, especially from research in environmental psychology, that argues that people use natural environments to help them shift negative mood states and maintain positive ones. Research has explored the effects of nature on human perception, emotions, behavior, and cognition. Urlich (1984) and Verderber and Reuman (1987) found that the quality and content of the view from a hospital window had a significant affect on a patient's recovery: The nature content fostered a quicker recovery postsurgery. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) found that, given the diversity of human preference and perception, there were strong and pervasive consistencies in the way that we perceive and show preference for particular environments. In particular, they found a preference for wilder environments untouched by the hand of man and also they found a preference for trees and plants. Recent studies have sought to identify the importance of woodland and natural landscapes for mental health (O'Brien, 2005). Other studies place contact with nature as central to our ability to maintain and restore positive psychological mood states (Kaplan, 1995; Shibata & Suzuki, 2001, 2004; Van den Berg, Hartig, & Staats, 2007).

In speaking of attachment we are talking of love. How can we love well? How can we speak of our loves? In some senses in taking the risk to love and become attached we are also acknowledging the inevitability of some form of loss. Nicholson (2003)

says that in speaking of our love we bring our issues of dependency and vulnerability to the fore, as what is loved can be lost or harmed or can even betray us. Who has not had to turn away from the television or newspaper when some new image of the destruction of the natural world reminds us of how what we value can be taken away? We have to wrestle with our own feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

The "Split" With Nature: Causes and Affects

The idea of a split between the human psyche and the cause of this split has been attributed by many writers to industrialization and the systems of thought needed to sustain and support such a disconnection (Davis, 1998; Du Nann Winter, 1997; Kidner, 2001; Roszak, 1992). Drawing on psychodynamic theory, I want to explore the underlying emotional reasons how this split formed and why it continues to sustain itself. I see the split linked to defences against our own sense of vulnerability in relation to dependency on each other and ultimately on nature.

Melanie Klein formulated her theory of the mechanism of splitting based on her work with children and adult clients in psychoanalysis (1957/1988). She saw the infant as driven by primitive anxieties that were central to its survival in what the infant experienced as a threatening world. She theorized that the infant's life was experienced in terms of "objects." The mother's breast was seen as the primary object, both actual and metaphorical, in the infant's world. She postulated that the infant experiences love toward the "good" object in the form of the feeding, comforting, and gratifying breast, and hate toward the "bad" object, the ungratifying, non-nurturing, unavailable breast. To tolerate the anxieties generated by the bad breast, the infant separates the good and bad breasts, even though they belong to the same person—the mother. Klein termed this the *paranoid schizoid position* (Klein, 1946), whereby the baby is attempting to deal with overwhelming feelings of love and hate. To move beyond the paranoid schizoid position the baby has to reassemble the mother and in so doing must come to terms with the ambivalent feelings it has toward both good and bad being located in the same person. By moving through this process the infant arrives at the "depressive position": a place where good and bad can be held together. The vulnerability in relation to dependency is the driving force for splitting.

If we use Klein's ideas to understand our relationship to nature, it seems we are stuck in a schizoid place in relation to the environmental crisis. Refusing to engage with potential environmental catastrophe that we face is a form of schizoid defence against vulnerability and dependency that we feel in relation to nature. This allows an organization toward vulnerability to be formed as a defence against dependency. We are in a paranoid schizoid place in relation to the environment in that we are not in relation to it. This is an attempt to preserve some desperately needed sense of invulnerability in the face of impeding environmental catastrophe that can be experienced as potentially annihilating.

Klein (1940) discussed other mechanisms used to defend against the sense of annihilation the infant feels at the hands of the bad object. Omnipotence is an attempt by the infant to bring things under its control, to exert total power. These defences can be seen in our attempts to dominate nature, in the sense of vulnerability we feel at times in the face of its indifference to us and our dependencies on it, which causes us to attempt to bring it under our total control. Herzog (2005) echoed these concepts in his film "Grizzly Man" exploring the life and death of Timothy Treadwell who lived among the grizzly bears in the Alaskan wilderness. Observing the film Treadwell has taken of the bears, Herzog states, "I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature." This poses the question: How do we defend against this sense of indifference to our suffering? One answer is in the form of the relationship to the good object: the defense of narcissim. Kernberg (1975) wrote about the narcissistic personality that affects the boundaries between the self and the object world surrounding the self. In primary narcissism the infant does not perceive the mother as having an existence separate to its own and, therefore, confuses dependence with its own sense of omnipotence, need, and gratification, all located within the self. Secondary narcissism forms as a defence against the disappointments of object love and the rage the infant feels against this. The recent book by Krakauer (1996) that tells the story of Christopher McCandless, who died in the Alaskan wilderness in search of pure relationship to nature, is a story of this form of narcissism. McCandless's quest for a reciprocal interdependence with nature, while central to the project of ecopsychology, became distorted by an unacknowledged rage at the human world. This rage was directed in particular at his parents, whom he abandoned, seeking alternative and pure relationship with nature: the perfect object relation. This in some senses was an attempt to compensate for the disappointment he felt with both society and the fallibility of human love, the disappointments of dependency and intimacy. This form of narcissism in relationship to nature should sound as a caution to us all, for it suggests that nature is perfect and can be the benevolent parent, but doesn't acknowledge the harshness and inhospitability of parts of wilderness landscapes.

With the notable exception of Searles', psychoanalytic theories in relation to the infant's broader object relations beyond the mother fail to include relationships to nature in any meaningful way. The fear of dependency that we exhibit as humans is a kind of madness, as the planet is so central to our survival. This fear of dependency and difficulty in expressing need due to fear of the vulnerability are key concepts within psychodynamic psychotherapy and would be a common factor familiar to psychotherapists. We fail to exhibit a mature dependency on nature and the planet and hold onto a psychotic idea that we are invulnerable.

Developing Mature Attachments to Nature—Reciprocal Interdependence

I want to conclude on a more optimistic note: Not all humans are ambivalently attached to nature, and, indeed, throughout history there are several examples of sustainable interdependence with nature, where healthy attachments have been formed in infancy and sustained in adulthood. Some aspects of indigenous culture are a good example of reciprocal relationality. Aboriginal culture existed for at least 40,000 years unchanged prior to colonization by European settlers. A culture intrinsically linked to the land, in that what the aboriginal saw (and still sees) was not an environment with different geographical aspects, but a profoundly metaphysical landscape capable of expressing their deepest spiritual yearnings (Cowan, 1992). For the aboriginal, land and self were not seen as separate entities; from early infancy both were deemed to be in an interdependent relationship, and the more-than-human world was incorporated as a part of an ecological self (Ward & Styles, 2007).

Recent research has found evidence for an "ecological self" in the emotional affects of migration. Ward and Styles (2007) found that migrants exhibited attachment to their homeland, in this case moving from Britain to Western Australia. Attachments were located in both human and nonhuman elements of their homeland and that this was irrespective of a good or bad settlement in their new environment. Spitzform (2001, cited in Ward & Styles, 2007) proposed that a self rooted in good emotional attachments to human and nonhuman worlds promotes good mental health and stable adjustment. This point is echoed by Searles (1960), who argued that the nonhuman world was important to the infant's healthy emotional development.

There is a need to both develop and promote models of infant development that incorporate an understanding of the more-than-human world as essential to healthy emotional development. Barrows (1995) argued for a developmental psychology blended with the insights of deep ecology. Though I support this notion, I think we need to be careful and avoid a naïve positioning of nature in our object relational world. Though some might disagree with Klein's bleak view of the "depressive position," where good and bad can coexist, I would argue aspects of this are central to a balanced view of nature's potential to both heal and destroy, as evidenced by recent natural disasters such as the 2004 Asian tsunami.

The split with nature is at the heart of our environmental crisis. It cannot solely be laid at the heart of industrialization, for our emotional development has played a key role. For a mature dependency to develop, we have to acknowledge our ambivalence, perhaps not to get rid of it, but instead to live with it, and not acting out our defences in omnipotent or narcissistic ways. Winnicott (1963) considered the true self to be derived from the aliveness and vitality of body tissues and their functioning; thus, for Winnicott, being is not merely existing but rather feeling real, authentic, and alive. This echoes how I see the project of ecopsychology: coming into relationship with nature in ways that celebrate the complexities of our emotional worlds, acknowledging not only the destructive tendencies of the human race, but also its capacity for love and reparation, and directing this capacity toward the natural world.

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