

# Mother Nature

## Charles Le Feuvre: Australian Psychological Society Psychoanalytically Oriented Psychology Interest Group (POPIG), 2014

In this talk I want to look at a number of different psychoanalytic perspectives on climate change

### **1. An overall view of the climate crisis as part of a broader environmental and cultural crisis in which there has been a denial of the importance of Mother Nature**

There are 2 ways of looking at the climate crisis. One is looking at the problem as a specific problem which we have to accept and which then has simple answers e.g. eliminate fossil fuels and become 100% renewable. On the other hand the problem may be viewed as part of a wider environmental and cultural crisis. Both perspectives are valid but a broader perspective invites a psychological approach looking at issues of denial that go much deeper than just climate change encompassing a denial of our dependence on nature, what I will call the Syndrome of Independence from Nature or the acronym SIN.

What is clear is that we are completely dependent on our natural environment and that nature has limited resources. Many ecosystems are on the point of collapse from unsustainable development. Climate change can cause major ecosystem collapse and in turn other ecosystem collapse eg deforestation can increase climate change.

From a psychological aspect the SIN syndrome very much equates with an omnipotent narcissistic attitude. Such attitudes have many causes. In Winnicott's way of looking at the situation, the omnipotent baby gradually has to be disillusioned by the parents to accept the frustrating demands of reality. Sally Weintrobe puts this in another way (writing in the excellent book Engaging with climate change-Psychoanalytic and interdisciplinary perspectives) "The biggest conflict we face in life is between the concerned part of us that loves reality and the more narcissistic vain part of us that hates reality when it thwarts our wishes or deflates our view of ourselves".

These psychological and interpersonal causes of narcissism are fed into by cultural factors- for example, our narcissistic society and an anthropocentric world view i.e. regarding humans as separate from and superior to nature. Tony Abbott made a statement to Tasmanian loggers that 'The environment is meant for man and not just the other way round' which suggests an anthropocentric view.

Our capacity to depend on other humans and be concerned about them may generalize to the natural environment or not. In fact it is important to see our connection with the natural environment to be a separate connection/ attachment to our relationship to the human environment. In fact many who have great difficulty depending on the human environment may turn to the natural environment for connections. At the same time there are many obstacles to the sense of dependence on nature. There may be those who accept their dependence on humans but when it comes to the non-human world, they are still omnipotent babies. This is what Lehtonen and Valimaki, Finnish psychoanalysts refer to as "The environmental neurosis of modern man: the

illusion of autonomy and the real dependence denied” or in my term ‘The syndrome of independence from nature’.

Our technological culture promotes identification with powerful machines and devices. Many people have limited connection with the natural world and also are very removed from their dependence on nature. eg water is seen as something out of a tap or increasingly a consumer product to be bought in a plastic bottle. We are disconnected from our own fragile nature. We can turn away from our mortality.

As Lehtonen and Valimaki say that “Because of our profound dependence on nature, climate change shakes the security of the human sense of being at a very basic level.” Because culturally and individually we have not had the infantile omnipotence with respect to nature disillusioned climate change brings up early anxieties and can so easily lead to denial as a way of avoiding the anxiety.

## **2. How psychoanalysis has denied the importance of Mother Nature**

Our ways of thinking and our intellectual disciplines are disconnected from the natural environment, in accordance with the dominant anthropocentrism.

Psychoanalytic thinking has tended to minimize, if not turn a blind eye to, the significance of the natural environment in our mental functioning. Within psychoanalysis, Freud personally had a close connection to nature. The natural environment was important to Freud as a child (Burke, 2006) and in later life and he had a very close relationship with his dogs.

It would appear that Freud never wrote systematically about the psychological significance of the natural environment. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud states however that ‘the ego is originally all-inclusive, but later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present sense of self is thus only a shrunken residue of a far more comprehensive indeed all-embracing feeling, which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it.’ (Freud, 2002, p. 6) This perhaps alludes to what has subsequently been called the ecological self.

While Freud was well aware of Man’s position in the animal world.

*Man acquired a dominating position over his fellow creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs... and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to annihilate the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. It is noteworthy that this piece of arrogance is still as foreign to the child as it is to the savage or primitive man (Freud, 1917, quoted in Searles, 1960, p. 4).*

Nevertheless Freud’s way of thinking reflected the anthropocentric thinking of the time and tended to privilege the human world.

The natural environment has been little discussed from a psychoanalytic viewpoint with the notable exception of Harold Searles’ book, *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and Schizophrenia* (1960). . Searles had a reputation for being able to work analytically with very difficult borderline and psychotic patients and wrote a number of influential analytic papers.

In this book he discusses man's kinship with and the infant's subjective oneness with the nonhuman environment, the nonhuman environment in subsequent personality development, the mature person's attitude to his nonhuman environment and the psychological benefits that derive from mature relatedness to the nonhuman environment.

He believed that relatedness to the nonhuman environment is 'one of the transcendently important facts of human living' (p. 6) and that while for 'hundreds of thousands of years men felt themselves in mutually interchangeable kinship with the rest of their environment' (p. 7) the pendulum had swung.

In terms of development, he writes of the struggle to be separate not just from the mother but also the nonhuman environment. He quotes Winnicott, who was writing about transitional objects and the importance of the environment at the same time, though it would appear that Winnicott does not refer to the natural environment other than animal pets. Searles writes that 'this nonhuman environment apparently provides, in the life of the normal infant and child, a significant contribution to his emotional security, his sense of stability and continuity of experience, and his developing sense of personal identity' (p. 78). 'The child can use his nonhuman environment through finding it to be relatively simple and relatively stable, rather than overwhelmingly complex and ever shifting' (p. 82) as the human environment may be.

Christopher Bollas's ideas are of relevance – the evocative and transformational object- where the object be that natural or cultural has power within its own right. As he writes ' I have found it rather surprising that in object relations theory very little thought is really given to the distinct structure of the object which is usually seen as a container of the individual's projections.'

### **3. Other perspectives on the psychological importance of the natural environment which may be helpful in developing an ecopsychology (a psychoanalysis that incorporates the psychological significance of the natural environment)**

Gregory Bateson, anthropologist and originator of the double bind theory of schizophrenia, was interested in complex systems. He argued that the environmental crisis was primarily a philosophical one. He believed that we suffered from an epistemological fallacy; that mind and nature operated independently of each other.

*Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, was the first to expound the ideas of deep ecology, which has a number of tenets including the inherent worth of non-human life independent of its utility to man. Deep ecology is not just concerned with dealing with particular ecological crises but looks at the fundamental values underlying issues. The philosophy emphasizes the interdependent nature of human and non-human life. In deep ecology there is an emphasis on self-realization where the self is very all encompassing and can include the natural environment (Naess and Rothenberg, 1989).*

Ecopsychology was a term coined by Theodor Roszak (Roszak, 1992). The basic idea of ecopsychology is that the human mind is shaped by not only the social world but also by the natural environment and that this environment can also help to maintain mental health and help mental

distress. It is backed up by considerable research, for example that a view of nature from a hospital window led to a quicker recovery post-surgery (Ulrich, 1984). There is the idea of the ecological unconscious: that there is an intrinsic mental connection with the natural environment. This relates to biophilia, an idea of Erich Fromm, developed by the evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson (Wilson, 1984), that refers to the connections that human beings subconsciously and instinctively seek with the rest of life.

Psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Harold Searles, can be integrated with the ideas of ecopsychology and deep ecology. This can provide a view of the self which is more connected to nature. In such a view it then becomes a healthy and ethical response to protect nature.

#### **4. How psychoanalysis can help in understanding climate change denial**

Climate change denial can be viewed from many perspectives (Washington and Cook, 2011), including the psychodynamic.

##### **Denial - a descriptive and psychodynamic view**

While much climate change denial, for example vested interests, is a conscious attempt to deny reality, a psychoanalytic view emphasizes the unconscious aspect.

Freud used three words which relate to denial or negation: Repression, disavowal and foreclosure.

These different notions of Freud point to the possibility of looking at different forms of climate change denial.

John Steiner has looked at 2 types of denial using the Oedipus story. Initially Oedipus disavows the situation. He knows or half knows the situation with his mother. At one point he becomes aware of the terrible truth which he is briefly able to bear though overwhelmed by guilt. However he then discovers that his mother/wife has killed herself. He blinds himself. This initiates a more profound retreat from reality. He can no longer see reality or the truth (Steiner, 1993). He no longer respects the truth: he is in an omnipotent state.

In disavowal there is a respect for the truth though it is evaded, while in omnipotence there is a turning away from and indeed a blindness to truth. Oedipus turns to divine authority which allows him to be contemptuous of the truth.

Steiner's differentiation between omnipotence and turning a blind eye allows us to look at different types of climate change denial, for example omnipotence may be seen as 'the preferred mode of perpetrators rather than bystanders' (Cohen 2001, p. 34).

While much of the media coverage of denial has been about cognitive denial of climate change, what is in many ways more relevant is ignoring rather than denying for as a Confucian philosopher said, quoted in a recent report. 'To know and not to act is not to know'.

While A survey in the UK found that only 20% of the population are unconvinced about the reality of anthropogenic climate change, it found that over 60% were unmoved 'ignorers' i.e. though they accepted manmade climate change they did not accept the implications in terms of their feelings, agency and complicity. I.e. emotional denial 'I don't feel uneasy about climate change' (splitting),

personal denial 'My daily actions are not part of the climate change problem' and practical denial 'There is nothing that I can do personally that will have any significant effect on limiting climate change' (rationalizations). In other words, there is a web of defence mechanisms which allow people to evade responsibility.

### **Why does climate change need to be denied?**

A way of looking at this is to describe what emotional states, induced by climate change, need to be defended against. This is well outlined by Norgaard (2011), based on her interviews in a rural community in Norway. She argues that failure to respond to global warming is not due to lack of information or lack of concern for the world but rather, as one of her interviewees describes it, 'people want to protect themselves a bit'. She mentions a number of threats: fear of loss of ontological security, helplessness, guilt and the threat to individual and collective sense of identity.

### **Unconscious processes in relation to climate change**

A psychodynamic approach goes beyond the descriptive approach to look at the underlying anxieties. Again, a paper by Harold Searles from 1972, *Unconscious processes in relation to the environmental crisis*, is prescient in this regard.

He states that the ecological crisis is the greatest threat that mankind collectively has ever faced (p. 361). His hypothesis is that: 'Man is hampered in his meeting of the environmental crisis by a severe and pervasive apathy which is based largely upon feelings and attitudes of which he is unconscious' (p. 361) and that 'the world's current state of ecological deterioration is such as to evoke in us largely unconscious anxieties' (p. 363) which he relates to different Freudian and Kleinian developmental positions.

Climate change can evoke depressive position feelings of loss, sadness and guilt. This emotional depression connects with the despair that Joanna Macy discusses: 'Confronted with widespread suffering and threats of global disaster, responses of anguish-of fear, anger, grief and even guilt are normal' (Macy, 1995). Such painful states of mind connect to the guilt and helplessness that Norgaard mentions and may be denied.

Searles implies that the ecologically deteriorated, technological world lends itself to a more paranoid schizoid perspective. 'The proliferation of technology, with its marvelously complex integration and its seemingly omnipotent dominion over nature, provides us with an increasingly alluring object upon which to project our non-human strivings for omnipotence' (p. 368) while at the same time the 'animal-nature based components of our selves become impoverished' (p. 368).

In many ways climate change denial may thus be seen as an omnipotent defence against feelings of vulnerability and dependence as discussed earlier in the work of Lehtonen and Valimaki.

## **5. A speculative neuroscience perspective**

I want now to move on to the ideas of Ian McGilchrist a psychiatrist. He has written a neurohistory, *The Master and his Emissary*. After discussing the functions of the r and l hemispheres of the brain he looks at how much right or left brain characteristics have predominated within Western culture over time. He argues persuasively that at this point the left brain has too much control and part of this is focusing on an issue without seeing the context or environment.

There are various levels of R brain involvement. The right brain is involved in the whole rather than the part and context rather than abstraction. There is evidence of the R brain involvement in coding for living things whereas non-living is based in the L brain. As McGilchrist says 'This flows naturally from its (r hemisphere) interest in whatever exists apart from ourselves and its capacity for empathy.' These ideas connect to some of the ideas outlined above - in particular Bateson's epistemological fallacy may relate to too much left brain.

Nurturing our right brains may not only help in infant development as outlined by Alan Schore but also increase our appreciation of the natural environment. The omnipotent narcissist may have poorly developed R brain functioning. Furthermore increased involvement with the natural environment may enhance our right brain functioning.

It is also important at the societal level to pursue right brain values if we are to survive as a species—to look at the whole rather than the egoistic purposive view espoused by the our left brain consumerist society. Interestingly McGilchrist states that 'denial is a left hemisphere speciality'. He gives an example. In the presence of a r hemisphere stroke the l hemisphere is crippled by 'naively optimistic forecasting of outcomes.' Sound familiar ! Perhaps one of the things in common between psychotherapy and trying to value our planet and a safe climate is the encouragement of the right hemisphere and its world.

## 6. In Conclusion

Whether we accept this theory or not, what is clear is that we have to change our thinking. We need to accept our dependence on nature, its vital importance and the limits of what it can provide. Our anthropocentric and narcissistic views are damaging. There needs to be an underlying change of consciousness in relation to the natural environment in general and climate change in particular. Within psychoanalysis there needs to be a shift to an ecopsychanalysis, made more urgent by climate change.

As Bateson says ' When you separate mind from the structure in which it is immanent, such as human relationship, human society or the ecosystem, you therefore embark, I believe, on fundamental error, which in the end will surely hurt you.' . It is now beginning to hurt and the hurt will only get worse unless we change our thinking. The syndrome of independence from nature is a potentially fatal syndrome for planetary ecosystems and needs to be treated urgently.

It is crucial that politically, culturally and individually, we are able to understand and contain the anxieties that are evoked by climate change; trying to minimize the potential for denial of reality and to maximise the chances of a realistic response.

It seems appropriate to end this paper by again quoting Harold Searles from 1972:

*The environmental crisis embraces, and with rapidly increasing intensity, threatens our whole planet. If so staggering a problem is to be met, the efforts of scientists of all clearly relevant disciplines will surely be required. It seems to me that we psychoanalysts, with our interest in the unconscious processes which so powerfully influence man's behaviour, should provide our fellow men with some enlightenment in this common struggle (1972, p. 361).*