

# **Advice from a sceptic: There is room for naturalism in ecopsychology**

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## **Abstract**

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Ecopsychology has a rich history of embracing knowledge and practices from many traditions. This large umbrella has widely embraced religious and spiritual practices while at times rejecting mainstream psychology. Considering the future of ecopsychology, is there room in such an inclusive discipline for a naturalist approach? This essay explores the current metaphysical approaches in ecopsychology and making a case for naturalism. It explores both the metaphysical and methodological implications of naturalism and suggests ecopsychology is strengthened by a methodology that seeks reliability and validity. Naturalistic methodology allows space to recognise the importance of anecdotal accounts of spirituality and avoiding a completely secular ecopsychology.

**Keywords:** ecopsychology, naturalism, spirituality

## **Introduction**

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It is easy to feel like an atheist at a tent revival when one is a sceptical ecopsychologist. In popular culture, scepticism is seen as being cynical or close-minded even in the face of overwhelming evidence, as with the phrase 'global warming sceptic'. However, scepticism is a questioning attitude in which claims that could be taken for granted are open to doubt. Scientific scepticism is questioning the reliability of doubted claims without systematic investigation (Gardner, 1957). Many times this is done through empirical methods, however it's simply a process of gathering evidence for claims made. Of course, the scientific approach is the subject of much debate and rightly so. However a certain cynicism has emerged in the field of popular ecopsychology: doubting the doubters. Coupled with this mistrust of the scientific method, there is a call to emphasize that which science cannot measure: spirituality (Glendinning, 1994). There is room for empirical work in the scholarly pursuit of ecopsychology, as many publications

would support. However this author's experience of ecopsychology as a practising field has been one in which those who adopt a sceptical stance on concepts like spirituality, mysticism, religion transcendence and so on, often get boxed in a category of Skinnerian black-box psychologists. What follows then is pressure from some ecopsychologists to adopt, for lack of a better term, a 'spiritual' world view.

An excerpt from the *European Ecopsychology Society's* (2006) "Manifesto for Ecopsychology" states an ecopsychologist is characterized by:

A wider vision of humanity which recognizes an interaction between physical, affective, cognitive, and spiritual elements which is coherent with Deep Ecology, Humanistic-Existential Psychology and Transpersonal Psychology

Firstly, this manifesto lays out specific theoretical orientations for ecopsychologists and one can assume neuro- or cognitive psychologists need not apply. However more importantly it explicitly states that awareness or acceptance of spirituality is an essential characteristic of ecopsychology. Terms like transcendence, spirituality and mysticism are very subjective and defined in a variety of different ways. This essay will not delve deeply into defining these terms; they have not been defined by organisations such as the *European Ecopsychology Society* and so must be taken in the most general sense.

Undefined spirituality may create a wide umbrella for different religious and spiritual approaches; however, it leaves a certain sense of ambiguity for those who are uncomfortable with traditional or even non-traditional spirituality. Thus the knee jerk reaction is to reject and drop out of ecopsychology entirely. Rozak (1971) suggested a potential split between environmentalists who adopt an organic animistic orientation and those who develop a more 'modern' perspective of the mind. In other words, two stands appear to be emerging in ecopsychology; one which accepts this 'wider vision' and one which is quite sceptical of it.

Giving voice to the sceptics, this essay attempts to provide a springboard to begin a healthy debate about naturalism and supernaturalism in ecopsychology. It is intentionally provocative and understandably may ruffle feathers. However, if this debate is not welcomed and instead ecopsychologists are pushed into the environmental or ecopsychology camp as Rozak (1971) implies, it will surely be the demise of vibrant development in ecopsychology. While it's true that

psychology in general has become a haven for naturalists and sceptics, it doesn't necessitate that ecopsychology become a haven for supernaturalists. Divergent ontological beliefs can be a part of fruitful discussion. In this vitally important issue of the *European Journal of Ecopsychology*, the theme includes the future of ecopsychology. The fundamental assertion of this essay is that there is enough room for both the naturalists and supernaturalists to take the field into the future. There is no need to send the naturalists packing to the environmental camp. It is important that non-naturalists take note of the current biases of the popular field of ecopsychology before naturalism can be an equal partner in the future of ecopsychology.

Despite the difficulty defining the terms used in the *European Ecopsychology Society* manifesto, two terms will be consistently used: natural and supernatural. Every attempt will be made to use these words within the common usage implicit in the most basic definition. Despite the emphasis on spiritual in ecopsychology writings, the term supernatural will be used instead. To attempt to define spiritual in any specific sense would inevitably exclude many spiritual people's subjective definition. In addition, there are attempts to create a very naturalistic spirituality and religion (Stone, 2009). For the sake of argument, supernatural will be used as anything beyond the realm of physical nature. This is restricting and perhaps religious language would be more comfortable with words like spiritual, divine or even God. It's also uncomfortable for the naturalist to describe supernatural because they may argue that there is nothing that exists beyond the natural. However supernatural is a more appropriate term because it not be based on any specific religious ideology, it merely refers to a power or force outside the natural material world. Another limitation of this term is its dualistic worldview of the material and immaterial (e.g., spiritual and physical). Understandably this is not a view shared by all ecopsychologists or naturalists, but the term supernatural catches the mystical otherness that the previously mentioned manifesto implies.

## **Metaphysics**

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In order to accurately propose naturalism in ecopsychology, it is essential to touch briefly on metaphysical ontology. In philosophy, the field of metaphysics deals with the nature of reality. Individuals that identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, materialists, rationalists, secular humanists, brights and sceptics typically share a common naturalistic worldview (Carrol, 2003).

Naturalism is a theory within metaphysics that holds that reality can be explained mechanistically or often referred to as 'natural phenomena'. This worldview is contradictory to the view that there are natural and supernatural layers to reality or even more contradictory to a monistic ideology that would hold the 'infinite' is the only true reality. Naturalism is in stark contrast to many pantheistic philosophies in which 'god' is the world. The divine essence of the natural world comes across in some ecopsychology authors' writings:

Gaia herself seeks to have our species leave its adolescence behind and assume its responsibilities of adulthood. This task is going to take the harvesting of the gifts and wisdoms granted to us by all 31 of the civilisations of the last five thousand years. It needs the insights and abilities of all the first nations' indigenous cultures of every continent. We need to distil the wisdom and insights of all sages, teachers, and spiritual students, swamis, gurus, prophets, saints and martyrs that have ever existed. Nothing can be left out, nothing forgotten. (Croft, 2007)

Without getting into the specifics of this kind of mentality, it can be disconcerting to some ecopsychologists to use the 'wisdom' of ancient traditions. What 'distillation' process will we need to implement and what regurgitated ideas from past religions should be embraced? For example it's obvious to most clinicians that harvesting ancient ideas like mental illness originating from demon possession is very damaging.

Look at a potential scenario: if ecopsychology embraces an ontological belief called idealism, it's in direct opposition to the claim that the true nature of reality is based on physical substances (materialism). So in this scenario, an ecopsychologist might adopt the eastern philosophy of the Vedas where reality is best described as a dynamic consciousness of living entities that originates from a supernatural divine cosmic source (Flood, 1996). Fair enough for the individual, but when popular writings of organisations within ecopsychology adopt this view of reality, it will alienate the naturalist. A naturalist does not simply reject the 'divine' cosmos: that's atheism. Naturalism makes spiritual or mystical explanations an unnecessary hypothesis and essentially supererogatory to scientific investigation (Carrol, 2003). Rozak's (1971) impending split becomes inevitable. Is it possible to avoid this division by using language that does not imply ontological worldviews?

## **Uncritically critical**

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In essence, being a sceptic is about asking important questions without accepting things at face value. People can claim to be sceptical, yet unfortunately some will accept things without much critical evaluation. Ecopsychologists will fall prey to this very easily by embracing self-titled critical psychology. Critical psychology thrives on a rejection of traditional patriarchal obsessed western culture and rightly so. A 'western worldview' adopts a technology and consumer-orientated mentality that in turn treats natural resources as a commodity, not an entity; this undermines the earth's natural systems (Glendinning, 1994). However simplistic it is to categorise an entire hemisphere of the earth as a worldview, there are important implications of this criticism. But rejecting one worldview merely to replace it with another is not actually critical thinking: "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices" (William James, cited in Miller, Brewer & Spoolman, 2008: 3). The destructive elements of any culture should be critically evaluated. However there is a significant risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Being concerned about the lobbying power of the pharmaceutical companies does not mean that psychiatric science is invalid.

The counter response from naturalists is to re-assert the importance of natural explanations of human behaviour. One such area is in the discussions around consciousness. Rejecting mystical causality, philosopher Daniel Dennet advocates naturalism by using the analogy of magic: Magician Lee Siegel writing a book on magic was asked if his book was about 'real magic', by which real magic means miracles and supernatural powers. Bemused she had to say no, the book was on magic that involves conjuring tricks, not 'real' magic (Dennet, 2003). Dennet uses this story to highlight the non-naturalists view of consciousness. His argument is that some people equate 'real magic' with the supernatural, while the magic that is staged or mechanical is not 'real magic'. Turning back to consciousness, if it is explained in mechanical physical properties as a naturalist would do, somehow it is deficient or not 'real consciousness'. The 'magic' will always escape explanation if it is presupposed to be an unexplainable mystery (Dennet, 2003). Therefore when non-mysterious explainable ways in which the brain can create consciousness are used, it is rejected outright.

Naturalists would be very critical of a non-physical or supernatural connection between human consciousness and nature. Supernaturalists in turn would see

material explanations of this connection as not being 'real' ecopsychology, instead relying heavily on non-material explanations. For example, ecophilosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling sees supernatural agency as an integral part of everyday life. Mind and nature are spiritually one, thus favouring a theistic interpretation of the human earth connection (as cited in Wolfe Bolman, 1967). Modern ecopsychologists may try to redefine 'god' as Gaia, presence or 'spirit', perhaps portrayed as psychologically meaningful metaphors. Derrick Jensen (2004) suggests conscious awareness of the our relationship with nature has been silenced by both western religion and science. He states that humans live in a "make-believe world" in which the delusion that everything is okay with the planet and despite being alienated from it:

If we celebrate life with all its contradictions, embrace it, experience it, and ultimately live with it, there is a chance for a spiritual life filled not only with pain and untidiness, but also with joy, community, and creativity (Jensen, 2004: 142).

It is right to challenge the delusions about global warming and the abuse of natural resources. Perhaps certain cultural ideas have contributed to this delusion. Unfortunately it appears ecopsychology is to substitute one "make-believe world" for another, merely replacing western religion with eastern and indigenous spirituality. The naturalist is concerned about knowledge construction via religious tradition, for exaple neuroscientist Sam Harris says:

The difference between science and religion is the difference between a willingness to dispassionately consider new evidence and new arguments, and a passionate unwillingness to do so (Harris, 2006).

Although this is a harsh and perhaps unfair judgement on religious faith, it draws upon the concerns of naturalists. If ecopsychology is built predominantly on the past and under the guise of being critical of western society, then it is a shaky foundation. A foundation housed in religious ideology concerned predominantly with doctrine preservation while masquerading as critical evaluation.

## **Teleological purpose**

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Another essential difference between naturalistic and supernaturalistic philosophy might best be understood in terms how explanations are used in the description of phenomena. When describing specific events, naturalists do not expound upon

“teleological explanations” that admonish purposes or design on the grand scale (Carroll, 2003). Explaining how a clock works is much different than explaining why measuring time is important or who invented that clock in the first place. Naturalism might take issue with the depth at which ecopsychology tends to define purpose and meaning to the connection of human and nature. Ecopsychologist Plotkin (2008) has developed a very interesting “soulcentric or ecocentric” model of human development. One of the precepts in his work is that if human beings are to thrive socially and psychologically, among other things, they must embrace spiritual traditions. This implies a specific purpose in the human nature interaction:

She must learn her people’s way of treating sacred things properly and maintain good relations with the spirits, gods, animals and landforms (Plotkin, 2008: 135).

Naturalists do not need to make such claims of teleology on a large scale. Granted, individual motivation and judgement is a part of the human condition. However a study of ecological systems need not be seen as purposeful or even sacred. What is concerning is the admonishment to establish relationships with spirits and gods. That’s not to say spiritual traditions are worthless, but they are not mandatory in understanding ecological systems and human behaviour. When it does advocate 'shoulds' and 'musts', ecopsychology is in danger of becoming prescriptive rather than descriptive. This 'wider vision' admonishes the spiritual as an interpretive framework, and in turn a teleological one as well. The extent to which depth and purpose is advocated in ecopsychology traditions is perhaps what makes it so appealing to many, moving away from shallow mechanistic explanations of the world and exploring how humans encounter the natural world in a deep a meaningful way. Yet great caution should be taken in this endeavour. Ecopsychology can become far too pontificating without much effort.

## **Methodology**

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In looking at the naturalism, there needs to be a distinction between a metaphysical belief system and methodology. One could argue that a naturalist would hold that ideas should be tested and that which can not be tested should be rejected, in this case spirituality. This results in a rejection of ideas that may be true because naturalists do not hold that only that which can be tested and detected by current methods is actually real (Forrest, 2000). There may be things that exist which are not currently testable, as advocated in quantum physics for example. But there is a

difference in what to believe about reality and a method of investigation to understand that reality.

The supernatural can be arbitrary and hard to quantify, often relying on an a priori use of mystical agency, and therefore is not an important matter of scientific investigation (Forrest, 2000). However, that does not mean a supernatural reality doesn't exist or that certain belief systems present a supernatural framework that is internally logical and consistent. Perhaps one way to prevent the potential split in ecopsychology is to avoid focusing predominantly on metaphysics. Instead, naturalistic methodology (regardless of ontology) could be used to explore ideas in ecopsychology. Practitioners and popular authors in ecopsychology are wise to include ideas outside the realm of psychology, thus incorporating many modes of knowing. Still, the heart of ecopsychology is psychology, which distinguishes itself apart from religion and spiritual traditions in its dependence on the scientific method.

So can the future of ecopsychology be strengthened by methodological naturalism? Yes, because it is a *methodology* that relies on the scientific method, grounded in empiricism as opposed to a purely metaphysical naturalism which holds to the inadmissibility of the supernatural into scope of reality (Forrest, 2000). Ecopsychology would do well to move away from metaphysical assertions and instead bolster the methodology on which it's built. What is proposed is a methodological naturalism as an epistemological approach within ecopsychology; one that asserts knowledge is gained from the natural world and that methods of accessing this knowledge should be separate from metaphysical views. Of course this approach affects what is said about ecology and psychology. Ecopsychology would then promote hypotheses which are testable and rely on causal agents which are explained by natural forces. Effects from observable events are considered to be from natural causes or mechanisms, not from super- or supra-natural forces.

Again, this is an epistemological, not an ontological position. Instead of speaking to what exists in the human nature interaction, it addresses how this existence is known. In other words, is it possible that supernatural forces impact the human being connection to the environment? Of course it is possible, but that's not the same as a knowable (Carrol, 2003). Methodological naturalism does not speak to existence but that which can be known. Ecopsychologists can embrace naturalistic methodology in reference to epistemology without a metaphysical naturalism.

Yet why not consider supernatural explanations in the relationship between human beings and nature? Shouldn't all modes of knowing be valued? This approach is very susceptible to Drummond's (2010) "god in the gaps." If the causes of an event are unexplainable and unidentifiable, it must be something supernatural. The tendency is to postulate supernatural forces to explain phenomena for which scientific naturalism cannot. The future of ecopsychology is in danger when it ascribes inexplicability to the supernatural, if only for the simple reason that the gaps in which a 'god' can fit are growing increasingly smaller. Because of the newness of ecopsychology, there are significant gaps that exist inviting many to propose supernatural explanations. Great disservice to the credibility of the ecopsychology occurs when arguments from ignorance are explained by supernatural forces. Patience should be exercised as methods of investigation continue to be developed, avoiding the idea that naturalism cannot understand everything.

Frost (2000) makes the distinction that transcendent spiritual forces are logically possible, but their status as existential possibilities remain problematic (Forrest, 2000) There can be all sorts of mysterious spiritual forces and forms that can be imagined up from nowhere to explain the complex nature of the world (Strahler, 1992; Forest, 2000). It is logically impossible to prove the existence of something about which nothing can be known, a mystery. It is also 'procedurally' impossible to prove the existence of something about which nothing can be known through investigation and gathering of evidence (Forrest, 2000).

Ecopsychology should seriously consider the viability of its future without solid epistemological grounding. Even the naturalist must concede that although there is no successful procedure for knowing the supernatural; strictly speaking it does not logically preclude its being known at all through prayer, intuition, revelation or some other transpersonal approach (Forrest, 2000). However these ways of knowing do not lend themselves to the same standards that one would expect when designing an aeroplane or choosing the best medical option for a severely ill child. In these cases, no level of intuition or divine revelation is satisfactory. Why is it when it comes to psychology interacting with ecology, practitioners and theorists are not willing to hold ecopsychology to the same rigour? The future of ecopsychology should seek to ways of understanding human and nature interaction, but in ways that allow for the establishment of legitimacy. Until a method of knowing the supernatural is developed in a valid reliable and consistent

manner, comparable to the knowing the natural, this is not a viable explanation for the interaction between ecology and psychology.

## **Avoiding secularism**

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Despite the emphasis on naturalistic methodology, ecopsychology does not need to be entirely secular. Secularists would support a society devoid of all religion and spirituality due to its destructive nature. They may define religion as an oppressive divisive and unhealthy. Although an interesting political and sociological discussion, this view on religion is not necessary in naturalism. Naturalists do not advocate removing spiritualism from the subjective experience of people's lives. People's phenomenological experience of the supernatural provides enough support to allow the possibility of it.

How can ecopsychology avoid becoming completely secular? In the same way psychology on the whole has, ecopsychology should support the incorporation of subjective qualitative, albeit anecdotal experiences of individuals. Subjective experience is crucial for hypothesis generation and motivates researchers to investigate many different phenomena. To deny the personal subjective experience of billions of people around the world is ridiculous. Spiritual traditions and beliefs need not be abandoned nor even divorced from the dialogue. Yet it must not dominate the field either. Naturalism is not about creating a secular society. However, it is about creating a secular methodology.

## **Conclusion**

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Ecopsychologists who do not embrace naturalistic methodology are in danger of using epistemological approaches that operate as though metaphysical supernatural forces were true as regulatory principles (Frost, 2000). In addition, the challenge to naturalist ecopsychologists is to avoid reductionism limiting explanation for complex ecological systems. Despite the emphasis on natural processes, nature must be understood in different levels of observation, both at the micro- and macro- level: from electrons to complex organisms, cognition to culture (Kurtz, 1998; Forrest, 2000) Of course methodology changes ontology: it should. If the future of ecopsychology is one in which naturalists are allowed to participate, it must be open to the ideas that emerge. Historically there are countless explanations for human behaviour that were once based on supernatural explanations that have

now been changed to natural ones. It's difficult to find many naturalistic explanations of human behaviour that have been replaced by evidence from supernatural explanations. If solid evidence is discovered that replaces a supernatural idea with a natural one, it should be embraced and vice versa. That is the true spirit of open-mindedness. If ecopsychology can explore people's subjective spiritual experiences without circumventing probable natural explanations, it will thrive as a respectable field.

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