

Editorial Preamble

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The Psychologically Confusing and the Nonsensical: Illogical and Contradictory Notions of “Nature Connection”

Introduction

Systematic, genuine, and concerted efforts to address (mitigate, rethink, combat, or revolt against) the onslaught of unjustified civilized complexity or arbitrarily pernicious forms of social organization (against the cult of modernity or ‘civilized life’), were put forth several times in history by such notable figures as Lao Tzu, Buddha, Epicurus, J. J. Rousseau, J. Ruskin, and S. Morita.

In toto, these thinkers responded to and sparked small scale, sustainable living movements that led to eremitic and more harmonious ways of living, practiced in solitude or in small communities. Some are (were) religious (monastic life) in nature while others rebelled outright against ossified and authoritarian (absolutist, fundamentalist) forms of religious orthodoxy. Still others, like the arts and crafts movements in England and the United States, continued to exert significant influence well into the 1960s with publications such as *Foxfire*, the hippie movement, and its undying new age reiterations.

The impetus to mitigate, rethink, combat, or revolt against the onslaught of unjustified complexity or arbitrarily pernicious forms of social organization often begins as a collection of symptoms that were categorized in the early 1800s as *neurasthenia*. Neurasthenia was thus a new label begotten at a time when farming and slow-paced traditional living collided with the relentless and brute speed and social anonymity of a nascent industrial and new era.¹ As industrial intrusion and its unintended consequences reached an unbearable and personally felt azimuth, thinkers such as William James coined nation specific labels, “*Americanitis*” (Daugherty, 2015), to describe remarkably similar phenomena occurring elsewhere: a socio-psychological pandemic of *malheur existential*. Let’s also argue that this *malheur existential* has all to do with multiple and interactive lines of ecologically grand, culturally specific, and

¹ *Neurasthenia* is still classified as a mental health condition in WHO’s manual of International Classification of Diseases and in the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders.

personally rendered types of nature estrangement and/or alienation (Conesa-Sevilla, 2006).

Ironically, as architecture and living-in-style magazines attest to, heartfelt and necessary ideas of simplicity as a prophylactic for mental and physical health became adulterated by the very affluence they critiqued. As “an aesthetic” reified in luxury stores and exorbitant price tags, these objects--rustic soul chairs and gilded fountains--are rendered unrecognizable and impossibly out of reach for the common person who launches the return-to-frugality-and-sanity revolution in the first place. Green-washing hipster trends and new age profit schemes aside, and as a testament to their once nobler and telluric origins, a surviving semiotic echo such as “*Wabi-sabi*” has a meaning-endurance worth saving—relating to—despite and beyond its marketed value of expensive ceramics.

The above observations may be relevant to present-day groups of professionals spawned in resonance with the thesis that *humans are natural beings first and foremost, and that time spent in natural spaces is essential to health*. However, semiotic degeneration is likely to occur anytime we are oblivious to, ignore or neglect the fruits of past and emerging facts: people have been “natural” folks for over 200,000 years with a greater part of humanity genetically admixing with Neanderthals and Denisovans—who in turn might, by the looks of it, very well outdo us, succeeding at 400,000+ years of unimaginably hard-honest existences.

Semiotic degeneration comes into play anytime we use words to signify generalities too vaguely and particulars very badly.² Who can speak for to/our Neanderthal and Denisovan ancestors (some of their genes having continuing effects on our health and behavior) accomplished as they were at surviving and thriving? One hopes that almost any ‘ecopsychologist’ can speak about h/her mode of achieving various degrees of relating (affiliation—Conesa-Sevilla, 2016) to the natural spaces they frequent and/or processes therein. Certainly, ‘green therapists’ are almost obligated to repeat, *ad nauseum*, the mantra *humans are natural beings first and foremost, and time spent in natural spaces is essential to health*. But if the same green-whisperers add vague generalities (pseudo-profound bullshit; Pennycook et al, 2015) or very bad particulars to that formula, we are justified in coming to their rescue. In fact, it is our responsibility to do so (Conesa-Sevilla, 2010).

Generally speaking, and today more than ever, we should all be wary any time we sense that another group of “professionals” has entered the arena of worthy

² *Vague generality*: Earth is an example of cosmic consciousness; *A very ‘bad’ particular*: Human consciousness resonates at a quantum level with Earth’s consciousness in soft purple and green infra-perceptual tones.

ideas rehashing anthropocentric notions with alluring but confounding hyperbole. The worlds most of us live in, I reckon, are complicated and challenging enough without adding more incoherent mystery as thus misery in the longer run.

Of this Chesterton (1919), a devout Catholic and rational thinker, and no stranger to the contradictions of belief, wrote in poignant and humorous fashion:

A mother of children, the wife of a great land-owner, told me with her own lips that she was, or was going to be, a Christian Scientist. She gave as her reason a conviction that the Christian Scientists were more purely spiritual than other people. When I made the obvious reply that even they could not be so purely spiritual as Satan, she laughed and seemed to entertain the extraordinary idea that it was a joke (pg. 357).

The Psychologically Confusing and the Nonsensical

One way to reference issues of nature estrangement and/or alienation is to backtrack to neurasthenia's cluster of symptoms and systematically eliminate every cause-and-effect potential (likely) culprit in a suspected factor-cluster of unjustified civilized complexity or arbitrarily pernicious forms of social organization vis-à-vis the unhappy urbanite.³ Ironically, the very generality and slipperiness of the construct "happiness" could even proffer significant clues if these are astutely and systematically pursued; that is, clues to why signifiers such as "nature" and "happiness"--the former encompassing a vast array of processes, from the subatomic to the cosmic and anything in between, the latter, a sensation, feeling, or state—particularly when confounded in one context, can be absolutely meaningless and unproductive in another (Conesa-Sevilla, 2018).

To be both cheery and fair, if noxious, arbitrary and meaningless cultural complexity leads to an erosion of once cherished and simpler values, and finally to mental confusion and unhappiness, then nostalgia is all that it is cracked up to be, some of the time.

An example. A fellow says he is "happy" after a long hike, now devouring a well-earned prosciutto sandwich with a glass of wine and taking in the beautiful scenery at the top of an alpine meadow. Is the feeling of "happiness" induced by the reward of resting after exertion, the pleasures of food and wine, nature itself—whatever that means--or a combination of all of the above? He comes

³ "To blow off steam," or "Doing it at full steam" are phrases still in use that harken back to the most recent and profound reconfiguration of self, time, livelihood, and community: the industrial era.

back and talks about “nature connection” oversimplifying, one suspects, an experiential gestalt hard to challenge at a phenomenological level. I make the assumption that a “nature whisperer” understands, at some other level, the complex coda of physiology, jumbled perceptions, and further interpretations that have taken place and more or less juggles these factors during “therapy.”

On the other hand, to profit from this assured outcome in most people seeking “an escape from it all” while mystifying the analyzable and scientifically legible interactive elements as a “spiritual experience,” for example, sounds like lazy work or the ultimate con job. In contrast, resort packages and wilderness experiences sound/seem more honest, charging good money for facilitating an almost inevitable “happy” experience: zip your way across the jungle.

The refulgent meaning, with sparkling and potentially endless emotional derivations, could actually be a bad case of indigestion; but who would know for sure? Jordan Peterson (1999) writes about the inherently relative (subjective) process of signifying experience this way:

Our predictions, expectations and desires condition our evaluations to a finally unspecifiable degree. Things have no absolutely *fixed* significance, despite our ability to generalize about their value. It is our personal preferences, therefore, that determine the import of the world (but these preferences have constraints!).

The meaning we attribute to objects or situations is not stable. What is important to one man is not necessarily important to another; likewise, the needs and desires of the child differ from those of the adult. The meaning of things depends to a profound and ultimately undeterminable degree upon the relationship of those things to the goal we currently have in mind. Meaning shifts when goals change. Such change necessarily transforms the contingent expectations and desires that accompany those goals. We experience “things” personally and idiosyncratically, despite broad interpersonal agreement about the value of things. The goals we pursue singly—the outcomes we expect and desire as individuals—determine the meaning of our experience (pg. 33).

Research on “happiness” confirms Peterson’s observations and analysis to the extent that people are more likely to fail achieving this elusive and romanticized state, “happiness,” for example, when made into goals that exclusively focus on “positive feelings” (Mauss et al, 2012). By logical extension let’s imagine our previous hiker getting badly hurt and having to crawl back to the nature whisperer’s yurt. Typically, and because the guru is supposed to be already advanced in spiritual matters, beyond reproach, all the blame and sense of failure is placed on the unfortunate urbanite—he’s deficient somehow.

A fellow is likely to do additional harm first by deluding the patient with esoteric and thus unattainable goals and finally by blaming h/her for failing to apprehend the grandeur of “nature” according to some fantastic and idiosyncratic plan, even if it is innocently carried out and well-intended.

If, like in the search for “happiness,” a fellow sells “nature” and “connection” in ways too general to be useful or too particular so that they exclude a vast and diverse cross-cultural constellation of means for affiliating with natural processes in ways that matter—in ways that alleviate symptoms—then that person is not being honest nor has adequately delved into the intricacies of these processes as presented in the scientific ecological and psychological literature—has failed to do his homework.

Walking with goats in the woods may be a great idea for securing more clients and may even lead to many happy occasions. One can leave it at that. But if one calls it “goat therapy,” “eco-tuning with goats,” or “nature connection with goats,” one is obligated to say a whole lot more about goats, woods, people, eco-tuning, therapy, and connection.

“Ecopsychology” as a Symptom

Yearning for and being in the path of authentic meaning are not trivial, nor are, our collective attempts to reach more genuine and desirable states of psychological being, in the context of, yet again, a revulsion and concerted effort to undo the consequences of arbitrary and banal cultural trends and forces. Some sectors of experimental and professional psychology have, let’s be generous, at least unwittingly been complicit in generating and amping an entire industry of well-being predicated in exaggerated notions and constructs (Davies, 2015). Of this Davies writes: “Positive psychology, which repeats the mantra that happiness is a personal ‘choice’, is as a result largely unable to provide the exit from consumerism and egocentricity that its gurus sense many people are seeking.”

A poor child of these shaky misdirections, “ecopsychology” emerges as a symptom of complex psycho-social dynamics without necessarily being the most significant or long-lasting check against centuries of indignation and agentic disconnection. How could it be more than a symptom when compounded tides of accumulated history and service to the *status quo* abate its meager, innocent, and gentile efforts?

Revisiting Peterson’s (1999) thought that “The meaning of things depends to a profound and ultimately undeterminable degree upon the relationship of those things to the goal we currently have in mind,” then, to repeat, if “happiness” is yoked, exclusively, to long-lasting positive emotions, one is sure to be disappointed. To define “happiness” in such self-serving terms is to set oneself

up for failure. In order to anticipate these pitfalls, one might expect from both ecologically and psychologically scientific perspectives that it pays to have an accurate sense of where a therapist and client are coming from before attempting to engage in “nature therapy.” A responsible clinical psychologist would, one hopes, begin from/with a solid excursion into the nearly impossible task of defining what “nature connection” is for each client. Easy answers that sound like panacea are, likely, too good to be true—or effective. As Davies (2019) writes, “emotive falsehood often travels faster than fact.”

Information overload affects us all one way or another. One possibly consistent result of the overabundance of information and of its 24/7 endless gurgling tap is that we might spend much less time in rational and critical modes of thinking, preferring a more emotional redaction of ideas that might upset our sensibilities—make us unhappy. Davies (2019), writing in a different context, observes that:

As we become more attuned to ‘real time’ events and media, we inevitably end up placing more trust in sensation and emotion than in evidence [...] Knowledge becomes more valued for its speed and impact than for its cold objectivity, and emotive falsehood often travels faster than fact.

Said more forcefully, and in prophetic fashion, Tønnessen (1966/67) remarked that, “‘pastoral psychology,’ ‘logotherapy,’ etc. are based on the philosophical illiteracy in themselves and in their clientele” (pg. 204). A wanting for deep, critical examinations and evaluations seems to be lacking or put aside in favor of some sort of “experience.”

If “ecopsychology” is merely a simplistic label people attach to any passing trend rather than an in-depth exploration of a cluster of serious symptoms related to the effects of complex socio-psychological forces put in motion by alienating and arbitrary societal constructions, then it is likely to be perceived as an improbable and unserious enterprise—a passing fad.

Illogical and Contradictory

Although contradictions are likely to surface when first investigating complex issues, they may also point to the fact that no standard has been created by which to examine and evaluate the worth of ideas. As with most serious journals, illogical and, more importantly, unrealistic arguments are here discouraged.

The editorial board of this journal will endeavor to solicit, promote, and examine submissions that address the following:

1. Identifiable, agreed upon nature estrangement and alienation symptoms measured in replicable and consistent fashion

2. These symptoms must be relatable to the effects of complex and perniciously arbitrary socio-psychological forces
3. Explore how these forces (#2) are directly responsible for further alienating arbitrary societal constructions that undermine evolutionary or traditionally sustainable modes of existence
4. Make use of cutting-edge research that examines the relationship of many other relevant constructs (e.g., “happiness,” alienation, resilience, “good,” “justice,” etc.) to issues of person/group *affiliatory* tendencies to natural processes and phenomena
5. To the extent that no single entity “nature” has ever been found to exist, then natural processes and various phenomena are likely to elicit a variety of psychological responses. If a singular view of “nature” exists in the mind of individuals (e.g., Mother Earth), then it pays to understand why a person insists in thinking so and what sort of behaviors it elicits
6. It seems highly unlikely that a multitude of people who exhibit a wide range of individual differences would speak of “nature connection” as if it were a single and universal *affiliatory* channel. In this fashion “nature” or “nature connection,” like “love,” “personality,” “god,” or “intelligence” operate as empty signifiers: have too many meanings to be practically useful
7. Analyze and explain how or why certain ideations, practices, rituals, or perspectives hinder or facilitate person/group *affiliatory* tendencies to natural processes and phenomena

In this more critical vein the aim of IJE is to join other behavioral and social sciences enterprises in elucidating the existential parameters under which a multitude of “psychologies” (a variety of conceptions of self) detect or experience symptoms that indicate that a profound schism has cleaved apart what they consider to be truer, productive, creative, and valuable selves (potentially “happier” people) from evolutionarily or traditionally (substantiated) grounds of being via arbitrarily pernicious societal norms.

This is no small task. It necessitates the thoughtful and critical thinking contributions of diversely schooled professionals across several disciplines.

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