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The Person-Centred Ecopsychologist

Abstract:

Eco-psychology challenges the anthropocentric and egocentric assumptions in which most therapies are grounded. It is argued that, while client-centred therapy conventionally focusses on the internal congruence of the individual, the congruence between person and planet also comes within its scope. Client-centred therapy is able to deal not only with personal anxiety but with species anxiety, which is manifested in both personal and collective pathology. The primacy of the individual and the primacy of the planet must both be fully acknowledged if healing is to take place.

Keywords: *Personzentrierter Ansatz, Mythologie, Beratung.*

Client-centred theory and therapy concerns itself with the world as constructed and experienced by the client. It is based on a number of premises: that client and therapist are essentially distinct entities, with their separate personal boundaries: that it is the client's subjective experience of the world which shapes the client's behaviour; that the success of therapy hinges on the therapist's ability to enter and articulate the phenomenal world of the client. On the other hand it assumes that the client's subjective experience reflects well or poorly a world of real objects in which the client lives, a world which can't be changed by simply thinking about it differently. Both client and therapist act in and on a world which is essentially "other". The focus of the therapeutic project is the quality of the individual's functioning and experience of life. In ideology and method it privileges subjectivity and personal autonomy.

Ecopsychology challenges the anthropocentric assumptions on which most therapies, including the humanistic therapies, are based. It abandons any essentialist notion of a boundary between self and the world. It does not perceive the world as "other". In such a perspective, adequate human functioning demands a congruence not just between one's behaviour and one's self-concept, or between one's self-concept and one's "real self", but a congruence between self and Nature. If subjective experience is acknowledged and valued, it is acknowledged and valued as a manifestation of the "mind of the world". The focus of the therapeutic project shifts from the individual to the planet. The uniqueness of the individual is illusory, or at most irrelevant.

I believe there is a point in forcing a meeting between these two perspectives, not so much to challenge the subjectivism and individualism of the humanistic therapies as to enlarge their view of the project in which they are engaged.

These two different projects are grounded in two different ways of imagining the world, two different fantasies.

The first of these fantasies is the fantasy of the many. It is the fantasy at the root of most psychological models of human life. In this fantasy, the universe consists of many entities which, though they may have connections with each other, are essentially separate. Human beings are essentially individuals, existing in a world of differentiated objects. The centre of experience is the individual ego. Human beings exist as separate, encapsulated egos, making their own way in the world and communicating by passing information across the spaces between them. For those whose work as therapist is embedded in this fantasy, it is the individual who is healed, or adjusted, or stimulated to grow, or assisted to emerge. I'll call this the Hero fantasy.

The second of these fantasies is the fantasy of the oneness of all things. In this fantasy, human beings are not terribly important. We are part of a larger system, which will continue to live and renew itself when human beings wipe themselves out. The given world does not exist for human beings, for all our arrogant assumption that there is something special about us. The world exists, and we are a not-terribly-significant part of it. Or, more poetically, the earth is our mother and we live in symbiotic union with her. Those who work within this fantasy

are concerned with the health of the earth, not of the individual. I'll call this the Mother fantasy.

I use the word fantasy here because I am not concerned here with the facts of our situation, not concerned with what is "objectively true" about it, but with the ways we imagine it. I use the word fantasy also because I am interested in the stories we tell ourselves, particularly the "big stories", the myths and fairy tales which are worked over and passed down in every culture as representations of our experience of the world and our attempts to make sense of it. Jungians are inclined to the view that the tendency to imagine or construct the world in certain ways is hard-wired in our physiology. Whether or not we accept this notion, it seems that the myths of the great classical cultures still reflect our psychological experience of the world.

The Hero fantasy is one story of how the world is. The Mother story is another. I suggest they are both true stories.

Archetypal psychology, which finds its inspiration in the work of Carl Jung and James Hillman, tries to see through human experience to the "old stories" through which human life constantly plays itself out. Human experience appears to be not random but patterned, and the patterns apparent in post-industrial society, appear to be essentially the same patterns as recorded in humanity's oldest stories. Whether "hard-wired" or not.

What sort of "old story" do we find behind our contemporary experience of the uneasy relationship between "Nature" and the individual ego? Ovid, in the collection of myths he called "Metamorphoses", related the story of Erysichthon to remind his contemporaries in first century Rome of something they were inclined to forget in their rush to civilise their world.

Erysichthon was a hero, a leader, a warrior, a king. In the fashion of such heroes and warlords, he would take his men off into the neighbouring territories to pillage and plunder, and when the pillaging and plundering was done he and his men would bring their loot back to the royal domain and feast and celebrate until it was all gone. Then they would go off on another excursion.

These were fairly rough times, and Erysichthon yearned for a little more comfort, a little more civilisation. He wanted to be able to feast in a way that befitted his status as a hero. What he needed was a really splendid banquet hall. Being a man of action he did something about it. He took his men out to a clearing in the forest and told them to get to work and build something worthy of his vision.

The first task was to cut down a huge oak tree which stood in the clearing. One of his servants took the axe and began to chop it down. Blood flowed from the wound in the tree. The servant refused to continue, so Erysichthon

seized the axe and killed him, then set to work to finish the job himself.

While this was going on, the dryads, the nymphs or spirits of the forest, were in a panic. If this tree were cut down their sister, the spirit of this particular tree, would die. They rushed off to Demeter, the mother goddess, the goddess of growth and nurturance, to tell her what was going on. She disguised herself as a priestess and approached Erysichthon as he worked enthusiastically on the tree. She ordered him to stop. The tree was sacred. It had heritage value. He hadn't prepared an environmental impact statement. He didn't have a permit etc.

Of course Erysichthon laughed at all this. This was an essential commercial development. The project would employ hundreds of workers and enable them to feed their families. You can't stop progress. The tree was taking up valuable space. It was a valuable asset which must be exploited. Human beings were more important than a jumped-up weed. This was his way of dealing with his mid-life crisis. She couldn't stop him anyway etc.

Demeter was angry, but being a goddess she controlled herself. She warned Erysichthon that if he continued with this project he would be very sorry. Then she left.

Erysichthon and his men went to work with a will. They chopped down the tree, prepared the timber and used it to build a magnificent banquet hall. They met their deadline and came in under budget. A complete success story. Then they went back to pillaging and plundering and brought all their loot back to the banquet hall for a feast. Erysichthon felt very satisfied with the whole project. He'd proved his point, advanced civilisation, done his bit for the economy and improved his own quality of life.

However, Demeter had not been idle. She had called one of her nymphs in and sent her to the far, freezing north with a message for the goddess Penia (Hunger). Demeter and Penia were not ordinarily on speaking terms, but the nymph was to remind Penia that she owed Demeter a favour, and explain how she might repay it. Penia agreed, and the nymph carried the news back to the goddess. So Penia rode on the cold wind all the way to Thesaly, which was where Erysichthon had his home, and entered into his body while he was asleep.

Erysichthon woke with a raging hunger. He ate all the food in the palace, but was still hungry. He sent his servants out to find more food, but was still hungry. He sat in his banquet hall eating everything that was brought to him, as his soldiers roamed his lands and the neighbouring countries looking for food. He sold all his property to import food. He even sold his beloved daughter into slavery. Yet he was still hungry. He sat in his hall crazy with hunger. In desperation he ate the plates and the cutlery. He ate the table. In his anguish he bit on his finger. And then he ate himself.

The Greeks of 800 BC who told and heard this story would have reflected that that's the way it is in this world. And, with a sense of history which the first listeners could never have, so do we.

In Greek mythology, the Mother and the Hero are often in conflict.

For the stone age inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula, divinity was Mother Earth, who gave them birth, nourished them and received them at the end. Indeed, they did not experience themselves as distinct from Mother Earth. For them, as for the new-born infant, mother was the world, and they and their mother were one. As they developed an awareness of themselves as dwelling in a world, the world they dwelt in was an entirely numinous one, where every experience was a religious experience and every act was a religious act.

Of course, they did not know that they were living in a religious world, because they were not capable of the kind of abstraction necessary to form such a definition. They simply lived, and the world in which they lived resonated with divinity. They entered into the rhythms of Mother Earth through religious ritual, ensuring through the magic of their dances and sacrifices that day continued to follow night, and that new life continued to emerge out of death. Their thinking was magical; they knew that their mimicking of the process of nature was the means by which the process of nature continued. Their connection with the earth was symbiotic. They had no sense of themselves as being distinct from their mother, the earth, or as apart from each other. Their identity was in their belonging. They had no sense, either, that they were smarter or stronger or more important than other animals, or that they were special in any way at all. They certainly did not see the world as existing for their use. The earth was alive and all-powerful and they were part of her. She gave all things birth and she devoured all things.

When human beings became capable of turning this symbiotic awareness into narrative, it was a narrative of the Great Mother and the Divine Infant who was at once her son and her lover. It was much later, with the emergence of different social and political (and possibly environmental) conditions that the Divine Son became the Hero, leaving his mother and doing "men's work". Apollo, Prometheus, Herakles, Theseus and the rest overcome "Nature", fight monsters (almost always female), go on their heroic journey, find their father's kingdom, conquer darkness and death. Some, like Herakles, are ultimately successful. Some, like Erysichthon, are pitiable failures.

The Hero story has been dominant in European consciousness, in one form or another, for three thousand years or so. Nevertheless, the Mother story has survived Greece and Rome and Christianity, sometimes, as in the German romanticism, with a strong public voice, sometimes slipping into the collective forgetfulness. When the

more poetic of the deep ecologists talk about Gaia and our organic union with her it is obvious that they are repeating the Mother story. When they talk systems-talk about the interdependence of all things, or decry our anthropocentric assumptions about the planet, it is the same story in different language.

The Hero story has many variations. We have, for instance, the Apollo version, where the hero destroys the earthdragon, imposes order on chaos and brings the clear light of reason to the world. Or the Herakles version where the superman completes a succession of impossible tasks, moving rivers and mountains to do so, and helping people along the way. Or the Achilles version where the youthful hero chooses to die a brilliant death rather than live an uneventful life. For the couple of centuries of the industrial age we've been following the script of the Prometheus version.

Prometheus is the scientist and technician, the hero who liberated human beings from the power of the gods, who stole the gods' own fire to bring light and warmth to humanity, who taught men how to take control of their worlds by technology, who refused to allow women a place in the scheme of things, who set out to improve the lot of humanity and was punished for it by Zeus. The scientific culture of the modern era has worked itself out within the Promethean fantasy of individuality, control of nature, progress, liberation and salvation through technology (or technique), in spite of the lack of evidence that science and technology inevitably make people freer and happier. It is only now, when it is becoming apparent that the Promethean project of controlling and improving the world has failed, that there is serious challenge to the Promethean version of truth. And one form this challenge takes is the return of the Mother story.

Counselling psychology, whether seen as a science or an art or a craft, has from the beginning been framed by the Hero myth. We can find the Promethean project in developmental psychology, in psychiatry, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, ego-psychology, rational-emotive therapy, gestalt and practically anywhere else we care to look. What about person-centred therapy?

The humanistic therapies, and client-centred therapy among them, are not as deeply embedded in the Hero narrative as some other therapies. Nevertheless many of their core assumptions are Promethean. They make the assumption that both therapist and client live in a world which is essentially distinct from them, a world which must be dealt with as "other". They act in and on this world as separate and distinct identities. They may be linked by empathy and relationship, but their separateness is not challenged. Though the key metaphor in humanistic therapies is likely to be a vegetative one (growth) belonging to Demeter/Gaia, rather than a mechanical one (efficiency) which belongs to Prometheus, it is the client-

as-individual who must emerge, grow, mature. The therapist acts so as to liberate the client from the power of impulse and compulsion, from conditions of worth, from inappropriate self-talk, from dependence on the therapist, or whatever. The therapist supports the client on a hero's journey, past beasts and barriers, out of darkness into light, from powerlessness to empowerment. All good hero-stuff. The centre of the psychological world is the heroic ego, as Freud knew so well:

Normally there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego. The ego appears as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else.'

For Freud it was obvious enough that the differentiation of self from environment was a necessary and significant achievement for the species and for each individual infant.

*One comes to learn a procedure by which, by deliberate direction of one's sensory activities ... one can differentiate between what is internal – what belongs to the ego – and what is external – what emanates from the outer world. In this way one takes the first step towards the introduction of the reality principle which is to dominate future development.'*¹

No more "participation mystique" with mother or nature. No more infantile sense of undifferentiated oneness with the world. The self stops at the skin. We are on our own in an alien world of objects. The clearer the boundary we build between self and other, the more heroic the ego, the less miserable we will be.

The problem with this, which is only gradually being recognised, is that when we look at the bigger picture, it looks as though it is our collective domination by the Hero narrative which is responsible for the plight of the planet. Prometheus' promise of emancipation from nature and the gods, his gift of the science and cunning and technology to control the material world, his privileging of "progress", has actually brought us to a crisis where the process of our extinction may be already irreversible. We no longer assume that science and technology will inevitably produce a better world. From this perspective our focus on the Hero narrative may appear not just problematic but pathological.

And just as we find the Promethean orthodoxy of control of nature under challenge from the deep ecologists

and others, we find the orthodoxy of ego-development challenged in psychology. In Jung-oriented thinkers particularly, but increasingly elsewhere, we find the phenomenon of identification with a single definable ego being construed as dysfunctional. James Hillman is by no means alone in referring to the "ego-pathology" of our "normal" ways of being in the world. The Hero has apparently failed to save us.

Carl Rogers' psychology and therapy were not enmeshed in a fantasy of control, and he did not identify the person with the rational ego any more than Jung did. However, there has been a stream of thinking in client-centred therapy which can well be called Promethean. Rogers' early empiricism contributed to this, as did his early ambition to develop a technique that was better than other techniques. This sort of thinking found its most Promethean expression in the models of Carkhuff and Egan who operationalised and quantified the core conditions to make a technical science out of client-centred therapy. Carkhuff's writing is manifestly hero-literature. Not only is he in a fantasy of intellectual control over the messy field of human communication and human personality change, but he has assumed technical control over input and outcome and over the process of bringing people to "higher functioning". There is a vast difference between this sort of writing about client-centred therapy and Carl Rogers' own writing, especially his later writing about the person-centred approach. Yet the technique-centred writing typified by Carkhuff and Egan still represents a certain type of orthodoxy in the field. And so it should. There are many ways of thinking about therapy, and this is one of them. The Hero story is just as true as the Mother story. However, each story only represents a partial truth.

What I am concerned with here is an attempt to find another truth about therapy. I want to examine what therapy looks like when it is framed within the Mother narrative.

Stephen Aizenstadt puts the question slightly differently: "What would a psychology look like if it is based on an ecocentric worldview rather than an egocentric one?"³ He suggests that we might, for instance, view depression as a natural response to the manic condition of the world. We might see the condition of the world being projected in the behaviour of human beings, rather than human beings projecting their pathology onto the world. We might listen to the voices of the earth and take them seriously. We might give up the notion that psychological

¹ S. Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Norton, 1961. p. 14.

² *Ibid*, p. 14.

³ S. Aizenstadt. "Jungian Psychology and the World Unconscious" in T. Roczak, M. E. Gomes and A. D. Kanner, *Ecopsychology*, Sierra Club Books, 1995, p. 98.

health is solely a function of individual wholeness and nurturing human relationships, and imagine rather that that both physiological and psychological illness is connected to our damaged relationship to nature.

*Once we are resituated in this wider, ever-transforming ecology of nature, we reconnect with the natural resources and the rhythms that live inside of us.*⁴

Aizenstadt is clearly writing within the Mother fantasy. Or take Theodore Rozzak's essentially Jungian argument that we are deeply implicated in nature, that the integration and emergence of the whole self, conscious and conscious – a process which Jung called individuation – is simply harmonising oneself with the natural world. Ecopsychology, as he understands it,

*holds that there is a greater ecological intelligence as deeply rooted in the foundations of the psyche as the sexual and aggressive instincts Freud found there. Or rather ... the psyche is rooted **inside** a greater intelligence once known as the **anima mundi**, the psyche of the Earth herself that has been nurturing life in the cosmos for billions of years through its drama of increasing complexification. The "greening of psychology" begins with matters as familiar to all of us as the empathic rapport with the natural world which is reborn in every child and which survives in the work of nature poets and landscape painters. Where this sense of shared identity is experienced as we most often experience it, person to person, we call it "love".*⁵

Definitely mother-stuff.

Whether Gaia is for us a goddess, an organism animated by soul, or a biocybernetic universal system, we are in the Mother story when we shift our focus of significance from ego to eco.

Where does client-centred therapy fit in here?

On first reflection, there doesn't appear to be much connection between the subjectivist and individualist worldview of the person-centred approach, and the great web of life, concrete and material and infinitely complex. There are plenty of people to argue that the care of the worried well and even the mentally suffering is an indulgence and an irrelevance in the current ecological emergency. Our efforts should be spent on saving the planet.

After that we can worry about whether we are happy or not. The conventional response to this is that saving the world starts with the consciousness of each individual. We can, we argue, give our attention to the individual without necessarily privileging the individual over the world. However, I think the person-centred approach has more to say than that.

Ken Wilber deals with the individual versus planet problem, the Hero versus Mother conflict, by calling on Arthur Koestler's word "holon", by which he means something which is both a part and a whole.⁶ An atom is an entity in itself; it also exists as a part of a molecule. A molecule exists as an entity in itself; it also exists as part of a cell. And so on all the way up the "holarchy". In fact, everything which exists is a holon. We seem to have no problem with applying this notion to everything smaller than us in the "holarchy", and even to everything larger than us, but we have some resistance to applying it to ourselves. We like to see ourselves as top of the heap, rather than as cells of a larger organism. One reason why the writings of Carl Jung have some appeal for psychologically-oriented ecologists and ecologically-oriented psychologists is that his therapy of the individual was grounded in a notion that our individuality is a secondary phenomenon. For Jung we are essentially momentary manifestations of a greater reality.

If we take on board the notion of human beings as holons, client-centred therapy takes on another dimension. Carl Rogers' proposition that a condition of successful therapy is that the client must be anxious or at least vulnerable to anxiety, has implications outside the domestic problems of the client. At one level we have personal anxieties; at another we have species anxiety. It seems to me a given that we are experiencing a massive collective anxiety about the incomprehensible danger we are in. We repress this anxiety both personally and collectively, but it manifests itself in collective pathological behaviour. It seems to me that is the essential work of therapy to challenge the lies we tell ourselves, not just the personal ones but the shared ones. The counsellor who attends fully to the client-as-holon will be listening not only to the private pain but also to the pain of the species and the plight of the world. The unconditional caring which comes with this attention will go "all the way down" the holarchy (and all the way up). James Hillman comments on his experience as therapist attending to the pathology of the world:

⁴ Ibid, p. 99.

⁵ T. Rozzak, "Where Psyche Meets Gaia" in Rozzak et al., *ibid* p. 16.

⁶ See K. Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*. Hill of Content, 1996.

I find today that patients are more sensitive than the worlds they live in ... I mean that the distortions of communication, the sense of harassment and alienation, the deprivation of intimacy with the immediate environment, the feelings of false values and inner worthlessness experienced relentlessly in the world of our common habitation are genuine realistic appraisals and not merely apperception's of our intra-subjective selves. My practice tells me that I can no longer distinguish clearly between neuroses of self and neuroses of world.⁷

It seems to me that Rogers got it completely right when he developed a model of therapy in which the means and the end are identical – congruence. We are used to dealing with this idea on the individualistic level. If, in my interaction with my client, I am “all of a piece”, if my thinking and feeling and talking and behaviour are all coming from the same place, if I am not telling lies to myself or my client, even lies I don't know about, the chances are that my client also will begin to function more congruently. We can push this a little further. Both I and my client need to be congruent not only in thinking and feeling and behaviour, not only in our awareness and our unconscious processes, not only within our own organism. We need also to be congruent with what we call the “natural world”. We need to be in harmony with the rhythms of nature. So does our culture, so does our species. Humanistic therapies have always been grounded in the notion that the separation of mind and body is pathological. We are now becoming aware of the deep pathology that has come from the modernist separation of Culture and Nature. The incongruence between our self-image and our organic experiencing, between who we as individuals think we are and what our bodies know we are, can be perceived as a reflection of the incongruence between our culture and Nature. The client-centred therapist can both offer and invite “deep congruence”, just as she can both offer and invite “deep empathy” and “deep acceptance”. Not only can but must, if she is not to be irrelevant.

Our psychology, even the fairly radical psychology of the person-centred approach, has trouble with such ideas. We think we can talk about empathy with human beings well enough, but what could we possibly mean by empathy with animals? empathy with rocks and stones and trees? Martin Buber has many sympathetic commentators, who embrace with enthusiasm his distinction between *I – It* relationships and *I – Thou* relationships, but they are inclined to stop taking him seriously when he suggests

that the two kinds of relationships exist not only in our encounter with other human beings, but in our encounter with the non-human world.

Those whose basic assumptions are grounded in the Mother story have no such problem. The systemic ecologist whose world is a wholly material web of life, sees the oneness of the system in which human beings are intrinsically connected with all material existence, and has no interest in the meanings which individuals attribute to their experience of this. The pan-experiential ecologist, whether philosopher, poet or nature mystic, is inclined to see deep empathy with the planet as the natural condition of human beings.

The Hero stories of the great classical mythologies, and the Hero stories of modernist science and psychology, depict the struggle for egoic consciousness to emerge from the darkness of unconsciousness, the chaos of Nature, the tumult of uncontrolled energies. The Mother stories of religious traditions and Nature philosophies do not see chaos and darkness and tumult but an order which is beyond our comprehension and which we should be content to worship.

However, neither the Mother story nor the Hero story is now sufficient for us. If we are Mother-worshippers we have to give up the fantasy that we can live in the kind of symbiotic union with the planet which was experienced by our stone age ancestors. If we are Hero-worshippers we have to give up the fantasy that science and human initiative will find us a way out of the mess. As therapists we have to learn to think polytheistically. We have to acknowledge both the primacy of the individual and the primacy of the planet. We have to focus simultaneously on the wholeness of the individual and the wholeness of the species.

In the late twentieth century both client and therapist are trapped in the story of Erysichthon, whether they want to be or not. They are both experiencing Erysichthon's panic as he finishes eating everything in sight and begins to feel in his gut the nauseous realisation of what comes next. There is no one here to heal us but ourselves. Perhaps we can call on Demeter for forgiveness, but she won't easily grant it. The forest is much safer without Erysichthon around.

Client-centred therapists are used to facing the impossible. Many clients come with a problem that has no solution, and the counsellor goes into the client's world without judgement, without any guarantee that a solution can be found, without any notion of what it might be. So the work of listening and reflecting and deepening is done, as the client explores what is there, pain and all, rather than thinking about what ought to be. And often enough the miracle happens. The tension goes from the client's body and he says: “Now I see”. And he leaves, not

⁷ J. Hillman, “Anima Mundi: The Return of the Soul to the World.” *Spring*, 1982. p. 72.

enmeshed in an impossible dilemma, but facing a manageable task.

We have to believe that if we listen with all our attention to the pain of Erychthon, which we can hear in ourselves, in our clients and in our culture, and if we can offer him our whole, congruent selves and our unconditional love, the same miracle will happen. We've got no other choice.

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