

In exploring what it means to be human in the 21st century, is the notion of an 'ecological self' one that could contribute helpfully?

In the next pages I will reflect on what, if anything at all, the idea of an ecological self might be able to offer to humans regarding the modern challenges we face in the 21st century, in particular concerning the modern ecological crisis of unprecedented scale that affects nonhuman nature too.

First of all, I would like to consider the scepticism around the idea of another new concept being able to provide benefits. This seems apt as one of the diseases of our society; the pathological behaviour of naming something, then making it accessible and understandable to everyone by directly emphasising the outlines of the final results. In other words, presenting a final product easily accessible by globalizing the same words and the same experiences to everyone, conceivably, comes at the cost of losing the importance of the process and the authenticity of the unique and (trans) personal experience.

This is to say, could there be a danger of the idea of an "ecological self", presented as a concept, becoming utilised to provide yet another new product for the latest needs of a post-materialistic market, offering a new product for the transpersonal demands of an increasing number of people? Therefore serving as a new tool for the capitalist system to adapt itself, one more time, to the current times without losing its dominance, this is, the market dominance. In other words, assuming that the idea of "ecological self" is valuable, can stay uncorrupted amidst the many versions of spiritual self-realization programmes offered under the umbrella of New Age traditions that have been selling ancient wisdom to the middle classes, which have proven to be highly compatible with the commodification and market capitalism contributing to the ecocide and ecological crisis?

Keeping these broad sceptical remarks in mind, I will now present the notion of an ecological self and the benefits it may or not be able to offer considering the challenges of humans in the 21st century. To have a better understanding of what the ecological self refers to, I will conceptualize it against the backdrop of the 'Deep Ecology movement' inspired by the Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess (Naess 1973).

The challenges of humankind in our century reflect the double face of the personal and the collective realities: the processes that build each of them, their needs, the relation and impact between them, or the changes they can or cannot produce are some of the examples of this double level of our times.

Following this, one key challenge of humans in the 21st century is how to achieve effective social change while creating personal and collective resilience; this is enabling our growth individually, together and for society. We could say, then, that a helpful contribution would be one that looks at the personal and inner dimension as well as the interpersonal and organizational. This would enable a solid

engagement and continuity in the struggles we face, including the ecological, the economic, the identity and the ethics crises.

Viewed from another angle, and putting the focus on the attitudinal roots of the modern ecological crisis, Lynn White advanced in his widely cited article that the way in which humans conceive of nature and our place in the environment determine the way how we use natural resources and impact the world around us (Macy 2009). According to this argument, the present ecological crisis is rooted in the anthropocentric and dualistic worldviews that have promoted the beliefs and behaviours of man and nature as separate realities where everything nonhuman is potentially out there to serve us, therefore leading us to cause environmental destructions (White 1967).

In this light, it may look like the notion of an ecological self relates to these actual challenges. As the school of thought that coined the concept presents, it is a notion that can definitely advance our understanding of deep interdependence with our home the Earth and all the co-inhabitants within it, therefore deepening our respect for them.

Now, the notion of an ecological self is rooted in the work of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and the 'Deep Ecology movement', which can be traced to a 1973 paper entitled 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements' (Naess 1973). The paper seeks to depart from the more superficial 'shallow ecology' or 'environmentalist ecology' movements, which, it argues, have showed to be concerned just about pollution and resource depletion, and, furthermore, are putting in the center of their objective the health of those who live in developed countries (Naess 1973). The deep ecology movement, in contrast, stresses holistic entities, including not only individuals but also non-living as well as animate being. The author justifies this all-important transition by rejecting 'the man-in environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image' and the 'biospherical egalitarianism', i.e. 'the equal right to live and blossom [...] with other forms of life' (Naess 1973: 96). These standards, along with others, would conform to what it is called by Naess an 'ecosophy': a broader approach than ecology which includes philosophy and political perspectives, which make it possible to include 'value priorities' and not only 'facts of pollution or resources' when attempting for an ecological harmony or equilibrium (Naess 1973: 99). These assumptions are defined by Patrick Curry as 'ecological holism', where individuals are conceived not individually but in sets of them along with other species or places; and as 'intrinsic value', where something or someone has value in itself rather than having value as a means to something else (Curry 2006: 40).

Naess believed that through tracing the roots of the anthropocentrism, and making clear the purpose of overcoming the illusion our society is built on, namely that humans are separate from nature – cited as justification of the idea that nature has only instrumental value and is therefore conceived as a mere resource – we will become also aware of a need to develop not only an 'ecological-self-concept' but an 'ecological-self-identity'. This, he argues, could enable us to overcome the social, psychological and spiritual ailment of our society (Naess 1973). Naess defends that by expanding our identity humans will be reoriented back with the natural world (Seed 2006).

In this vein, the ecological self is presented as a self-realization process where the nature of entities is constituted by the relations between them, rather than entities being preformed and then establishing relations, or such relations being simply one-way. In Naess' words, 'relational, *total-field image* rather than a *man-in-the-environment image*' (Curry 2006: 73). This total-field is the ecological self; 'one's real Self, as distinct from one's illusionary ego-self' (Curry 2006: 73). Therefore, since one's own self (or nature) has become one with the nature's nature, consequently the individual would not harm the natural world in the same way that would not harm oneself (Curry 2006).

Some critics of Naess' ideas regarding ecological-self-identity have alleged an intellectual and metaphysical implausibility of the term. 'It is [...] hopelessly impracticable as a guide to action: you cannot ask anyone (let alone everyone) to live as if literally every life-form – a lethal virus, say – has equal value to all others, including her- or himself; and it offers no guidance, indeed it allows no way, to resolve inevitable conflicts' (Curry 2006: 76). Here, I am interested in how Naess' ideas can be a guide to action for achieving the ecological-self-experience?

For this, we need to look at the whole process to just have a small taste of what this means. We cannot look at the final concept, the final result of it, and experience the deep sense of this idea is trying to express. Transformation resides in the process itself. As Lao Tzu said, freeing yourself from the desire of finding is what will allow you to see (Lao Tzu 1978).

If that were true, however, how then can we present the concept in a way that is useful for the 21st century? Do we even have to think about this? Maybe these are not matters that deserve our efforts or that are approachable from conceptual angles. Maybe it's less about defining what is and what isn't a proper ecological self, or how to create a guide to action for it, and more about experiencing the ecology without the self, and the self without the ecology. If what we are trying to praise with the idea of an ecological self is to overcome the different dualistic views that made humans and individuals think about themselves as separated from the rest out there, shouldn't we stop using the same dualistic language? Otherwise isn't it providing a new solution with the same problems within it?

The experience of the ecological self has to be achieved through the absence of the self. There have been many thinkers, philosophers, and saints that have tried to express this process of losing the self before Arne Naess in different languages and contexts, many other anonymous people just have experienced it. Present in all traditions and eras, what all these voices have tried to talk about, using different concepts and languages, is that an ecological-self-identity doesn't appear or emerge from a rational discourse. At the bottom, it is through self-discovery work that we can eventually embrace the idea that what I am isn't different to what you/she/it is. By discovering what you are, you discover what the other is. Discovering your inside, you discover the outside. Like the ancient Greek aphorism said in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: 'Know Thyself and You Will Know the Universe and the Gods'.

Voices from Buddhist traditions speak about the interdependent nature of all phenomena. Which means that if we look deeply into the nature of our universe we can see that all things exist in no other way than profoundly interdependent. Then, the realisation that we have no separate self, that everything is empty of a separate self in a universe, which is in a constant state of flux and change, will arise within us. Authors like Thich Nhat Hanh have, too, presented new concepts to explain this experience, like for example his concept of 'interbeing', which describes the essential interconnectedness of the universe, and to challenge the humans by looking beyond the world of concepts and opposites (Thich Nhat Hanh 1987).

Voices from the Christian tradition, for instance, have spoken about the metaphor of the silkworm and the moth. The silkworm is seen as the symbol of an ascetic stage in which the self of the person is the protagonist, which must die so as to yield protagonism to the self with communion with God, with everything. This will transform the ascetic silkworm into a mystical moth in union with all. The silkworm dies with blind faith, a jump into the empty. Is in that jumping, abandoning the self, dying, that the silkworm is reborn in a new state, as a moth. We humans, too, need to dare that jump into the unknown emptiness. We cannot try to do this using our thinking-mind, just like the silkworm doesn't know it will be reborn as a moth. By being attached to the wanting of being the silkworm – this is, to the self – transformation cannot take place. To be reborn, you have to die in life. In the same way, when the grain dies in the earth, it is the step that leads to a new spike that will contain forty new grains. Or when an acorn dies on the ground, a new holm oak will be born from it.

We are in a better position now to see that the ecological self reflects these two realities: the inner and the exterior. The first step of looking inside, followed by the looking outside, to end in the realization that there is no such an in or out differentiation. Therefore, the concept of an ecological self can contribute helpfully in the 21st century to cover partially one of these realities, but not the other or the whole process. The exterior part, the social part, can follow the narrative of words and concepts in such ways as providing a new and needed frame of laws and ethics in line with the communion and respect of our interdependent nature with the Earth and other species. This will be in tune with what Arne Naess presents with the 'deep ecology movement' or with his idea of 'biocentric egalitarianism', which refers to the equal right of entities in nature 'to live and blossom', considering both human and non-human forms (Curry 2006).

But in what the inner reality of our personal transformations refers to, any concept can be useful to guide us; this is the spiritual, the subjective and the personal travel of our self into the ecological self; an ineffable transition different in each individual, where we experience that the nature observes at herself through us. In the words of Science, the limbic system doesn't follow the knowledge in the way we humans express it through words, thinking and rationalizing. This is to say, the ideas can only engage with one part of our mind in cognition.

It is only by developing one that the other will follow suit. First we have to look inside us, then

necessarily we will start to look outside, to finally overcome this dualistic view; but still, allowing us to live between these two realities (the dual and the non-dual) and to not believe either of them too much.

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