

Ecopsychology: Remembering the True Source of Our Consciousness

Glenn Aparicio Parry, PhD

ABSTRACT: Mainstream psychology is limited by the a-priori assumption that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of the brain; while the emergent discipline of ecopsychology posits the whole of Nature as the source of our consciousness. Ecopsychologists contend that we do not think independently from nature—that it is the living elements of Nature from which human consciousness co-arises. The formal academic discipline of psychology—formed in the late 19th century—attempted to isolate human consciousness from the rest of Nature. Mainstream psychology is not unique in this attempt; nearly all other academic disciplines, including economics, are based on a similar abstract separation from Nature in an attempt to maintain scientific objectivity. In the past century, quantum theory upended the conventional separation between observer and observed, but mainstream psychology failed to adapt. Ecopsychology, through reestablishing connection to Nature, is a movement in the right direction of dissolving the dichotomous split in consciousness. It must avoid the pitfalls of academe, however, and not become an abstract discipline.

Keywords: ecology, psychology, consciousness, economics, history, Native American studies

“The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how Nature works and how people think.”

_____ Gregory Bateson

In modernity, we have forgotten how blessed we are to be alive because we have forgotten the source of our consciousness: Nature. In short, we have forgotten how to think. It is imperative that we remember; otherwise, we will not reverse the ecological damage that we have rendered in the past few centuries. Mainstream psychology, unfortunately, will not provide the answer. Psychology is supposed to be the study of how human beings think; but the field arose due to a significant error in modern thinking—specifically, our imagined separation from Nature. To remember how to think, then, requires a complete revisioning of psychology that includes recovering some of the old ways of thinking without discarding the new. The subdiscipline of ecopsychology is a step in the right direction, because it helps us reconnect with the true source of our consciousness.

The fundamental problem with the discipline of psychology is that it was founded on a false premise: that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of the brain. Mainstream psychologists assume that our brains evolved the ability to think and that the source of consciousness is therefore located inside the brain—apart from the natural world and from each other. The entire discipline of psychology rests upon this *a priori* assumption.

If we assume that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of the brain, we are left with the unresolvable “hard problem” of the relationship between the physical brain processes and our phenomenal experiences/mental states.¹ But if we make a different *a priori* assumption—that consciousness has always been here and is embedded in everything; that consciousness did not evolve only in the human brain (or in the brains of other species) independent from the rest of the natural world—then the so-called hard problem goes away. In this view, brains evolved in

reciprocal relationship with the natural world. Rather than generating consciousness on our own, *sui generis*, we are primarily receivers of consciousness. The common use of the phrase, “A thought came to me” is apt—for thoughts do come to us from Nature all the time. This is not to say that we are incapable of being a transformer of thought once we receive it. Like an electrical power substation, we step down the incoming thought to the voltage level we can comprehend and send on the lower voltage energy to others. It is in this way that thought rapidly pervades society, acting much like a living virus, as the physicist David Bohm noted.ⁱⁱ But the primary, original source of whole and complete thought, is Nature. We merely act as secondary generators.

Indigenous peoples today understand, as they have for millennia, that the original source of consciousness is Nature. There is reason to believe that our Western European ancestors felt the same. An important clue is in the origin of the word “thinking,” which is *thanking*. This is true in at least seven languages that I know of (Old Saxon, English, French, German, Norse, Dutch, Frisian) and probably a whole lot more. In English, the proto-Germanic *pankaz* is the root of both thinking and thanking (or the giving of gratitude). When the ancients thought, they thanked. Why? The only explanation that makes sense to me is that *originally all our thoughts were prayers*. In other words, all our thoughts once connected us to Nature in a sacred way. Imagine that: living in a state of continual gratitude simply for being an integral part of the Great Mystery.

This original worldview, founded in blessing and wholeness, served humankind quite well for millennia. We lived in harmony with the rest of creation until most of us unlearned to think this way—psychologically severing our umbilical cord with Mother Nature. It was then that we moved in the direction of becoming self-centered, egoic beings, imagining that we were transcendent from (and thereby superior) to Nature. But we can never really improve on Nature, as Buckminster Fuller understood when he said: “The opposite of Nature is impossible.”ⁱⁱⁱ Nor can we ever separate from Nature. How could we—when we are composed of the same elements as Nature and wholly dependent upon light, air, water, and earth to live? Nonetheless, we persist in this faulty perception, brought on by the egocentric nature of modern thinking.

Sadly, much of human striving is a vain and futile attempt to separate from our origins. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that we are superior and transcendent from Nature when, in actuality, we are only intelligent because Nature is intelligent. We would be better off if we reacquainted ourselves with the larger source from which our personal consciousness is derived. It does not demean us to realize that our brilliance is dependent upon the brilliance of Nature. Is not being part of the Great Mystery enough reason to celebrate? We do not and cannot exist independently from Nature. We are nested in the whole of Nature just as the individual cells of our body are nested in their whole.

A human being is part of the whole, called by us Universe. ... We now experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the Rest ... a kind of optical delusion of our Consciousness. This delusion is a prison for us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature in her beauty.

—Albert Einstein

Psychology and Sociology

Humans are fundamentally social creatures, nested in families, groups of like-minded friends, and larger societies. We cannot survive without human interaction. This is universally understood everywhere except in the West where we persist in the notion of individual psychological autonomy. The Japanese word for a human being – *ningen*– refers to a relationship between self and others. There is no Japanese word for a separate individual existing in their own psychological shell as such a concept would be nonsensical to the Japanese. A similar worldview prevails in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Indigenous cultures all over the world, including in Native America.

The academic discipline of psychology, by positing an independent and disconnected psyche, cuts us off from the two most vital sources of regenerative happiness: support from people and support from Nature. It is not a coincidence that the discipline of sociology was founded almost immediately after the founding of psychology in the late 19th century.^{iv} The creation of psychology left a void between self and society that the new field of sociology sought to address. The newly formed discipline of ecopsychology arose in a similar manner, out of a void between self and Nature. Clearly, we cannot survive or thrive in isolation from the natural world.

The potential for ecopsychology is, in my view, greater than sociology, as it potentially speaks to the source of fragmentation—not just in academe or society, but in our underlying perception of reality. The very thought of merging our psyche with the natural world has the potential to reawaken a repressed desire to connect with the living elements as the source of our consciousness.

For ecopsychology to succeed, however, it must break out of the tendency in academe to communicate almost entirely in abstractions. It cannot be the *study of* the relationship between ecology and psychology. It needs to be a *study in* Nature. It must be immediate, sensuous, and real. It needs to be taught, at least in part, if not wholly, in the natural world. It is, thankfully, taught this way at Naropa University, Southwestern College, and other emerging programs. It is not enough to intellectually realize that we are dependent upon the living elements for our life. For ecopsychology to take root in a way that makes effective change in the world, it must be felt on a heart level.

We must reestablish an actual relationship with the elements, first in our hearts through sacred thought and prayer; and then by carrying out this heartfelt connection through sacred action in the world. This includes acting as a protector and/or purifier of the elements whenever necessary, which is pretty much all the time now.

Let's face it. We exist in a mad society that treats the elements with blatant disdain even though we are wholly dependent upon them to remain alive. Our bodies are made up of the elements in the same proportion as the planet; in short, *we are the elements*. And yet we drill for oil right through the oceans and repeatedly suffer the consequences when there is the inevitable

accident; we fill the same ocean (and there really is only one ocean with different names) with plastic and other trash that is killing the marine life; we dam the life force of our mighty rivers, which decimates the surrounding watersheds; we poison our ground water while fracking for natural gas; we destroy our topsoil with industrial monoculture farming; we alter our foods with chemical fertilizers or genetic modifications that do not require pesticides because the “food” has been converted into a pesticide itself and is therefore regulated by the EPA, not FDA^v— all in a rush to increase short term profits and (supposedly) to maximize modern conveniences.

This is our modern madness. There is no rational justification for myopic planning that prioritizes short term economic growth predicated upon poisoning the drinking water that keeps us alive—today, and for future generations (if we are wise enough to protect and purify the waters). Yet, we frack away in the US with gleeful abandon, trumpeting our independence from foreign oil as a valid reason for doing so while ignoring or suppressing evidence of ground water catching on fire^{vi} or the increase of earthquakes in heavily fracked areas.^{vii} What will it take for psychologists to recognize this form of action as the insanity that it is? Theodore Roszak surmised that it might take the inclusion of “environmental craziness” in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).^{viii}

The Root of Modern Economics

Roszak realized that psychology needed ecology, and that ecology needed psyche. His larger intent in coining the word ecopsychology was to create a cross-disciplinary dialogue that could influence public policy decisions for the betterment of the planet and future generations.

Clearly, there is an urgent need for ecological consideration in all avenues of public policy making. Nowhere is this truer than in economics, which, like ecopsychology, ought to be rooted in the environment. Significantly, both share the same root word—*eco*—derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “home.” The original meaning of economics is thus the management of the home (*oikos* plus *nomos* [management]) — as in the home economics courses of my youth. Ideally, ecology—the knowledge of home (planet Earth)—should encompass economics, the management of home, because human economics is always dependent upon the economics of nature (finite limits of natural resources). In my estimation, the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund should all answer to a higher power: a *World Ecology* organization (call it WE for short).

Instead, the economists who pay the least mind to the environment continue to exert the strongest influence. Villages, towns, states, and national governments determine much of their public policy based on the forecasts of these economists. This is true even as economics may be the only field in which two people can share a Nobel prize in the same year (as recently as 2013) for saying completely opposite things.^{ix} In fairness, the physicist Bohr once said that “The opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth”^x—so who knows? Both economists may be right.

Psychology was founded in the vain and illusory attempt to separate psyche from Nature and economics shares the same delusion. Economics, moreover, suffers from another fallacy: the

pretense of being a deductive science suitable to analysis, prediction, and control. This occurred because economics was one of the first social sciences (founded in 1885) predating psychology and sociology, and tried to model itself after physics. This arguably furthered the discipline—but at the expense of the planet. It also conveniently ignores the fact that economies are created and run by human beings, who are notoriously unpredictable.

In truth, modern economics has devolved into what Aristotle would have called *chrematistics*, an appropriately ghastly sounding term he used to refer to the “particular branch of political economy relating to the manipulation of property and wealth so as to maximize short-term monetary exchange value to the owner.”^{xi} *Chrematistics* was frowned upon in the ancient world but modern economics *is chrematistics* because it has completely disconnected itself from the beauty of Nature. Everything in the natural world—be it the land, the water, the air, or the light—is a non-economic “externality” to the economist until human beings develop it for their purposes. Essentially, economics has remade man in his image, into the species “homo economicus.”^{xii} This is not only an abstraction; it is a perversion of the possibility of humankind.

The Fallacy of Academic Abstractions

As recently as a little over two hundred years ago, there were typically only three major disciplines in academe: law, medicine, and theology.^{xiii} But universities have since standardized the practice of organizing knowledge into a plethora of abstract academic disciplines. They have done this so thoroughly and successfully that its efficacy is no longer questioned, inside or outside academe. Society as a whole has unconsciously come to believe that the world really is divided up into subjects. Our graduates enter society as if they were a horse with blinders, unwilling or unable to consider what is outside their field of expertise. They enter their fields believing (in whole or in part) that the real world operates as it does in academe. It does not, of course. Real problems do not conform to disciplinary borders, much as we may wish them to.

In short, academe has created a world of fragmented thinkers. And “fragmented thinking,” as Bohm noted, “creates a fragmented society.” It is time to reform not just academic disciplines, but our thinking itself. Until we reform our thinking processes in keeping with how Nature thinks, we can never make any progress. For example, we have come to view Nature mostly in terms of isolated cause and effect. But this is a small part of the picture. Nature is not readily reducible to cause and effect; she acts more like an orchestra conductor, with everyone playing at the same time, creating beautiful music through harmonious, synergistic interaction. As the late Anishanaabe elder Tobasonakwut Kinew taught, we should be looking for “what kinds of things want to happen together” such as corn, beans, and squash, known as the three sisters by Native Americans. A less obvious but powerful example is the totality of waters in the world—the waters above the sky, under the earth, in the rivers, streams, lakes, and oceans—for all these waters interact and interchange positions through the hydrological cycle.

Observing water is key, because we are more connected to water than we realize. We are water beings ourselves, made up of at least 70% water; and the way we think is remarkably similar to the hydrological cycle. Our ideas are like drops of rain that trickle in and pool into streams of consciousness; some go underground until the time is right, but most become

mainstream thought and lead to mighty rivers and oceans. Eventually, however, mainstream thought becomes stagnant and evaporates up into the sky; hob-knobs with other idea clouds; and comes crashing back to Earth in a brainstorm of new inspiration, perhaps even a new paradigm.

Dialogue

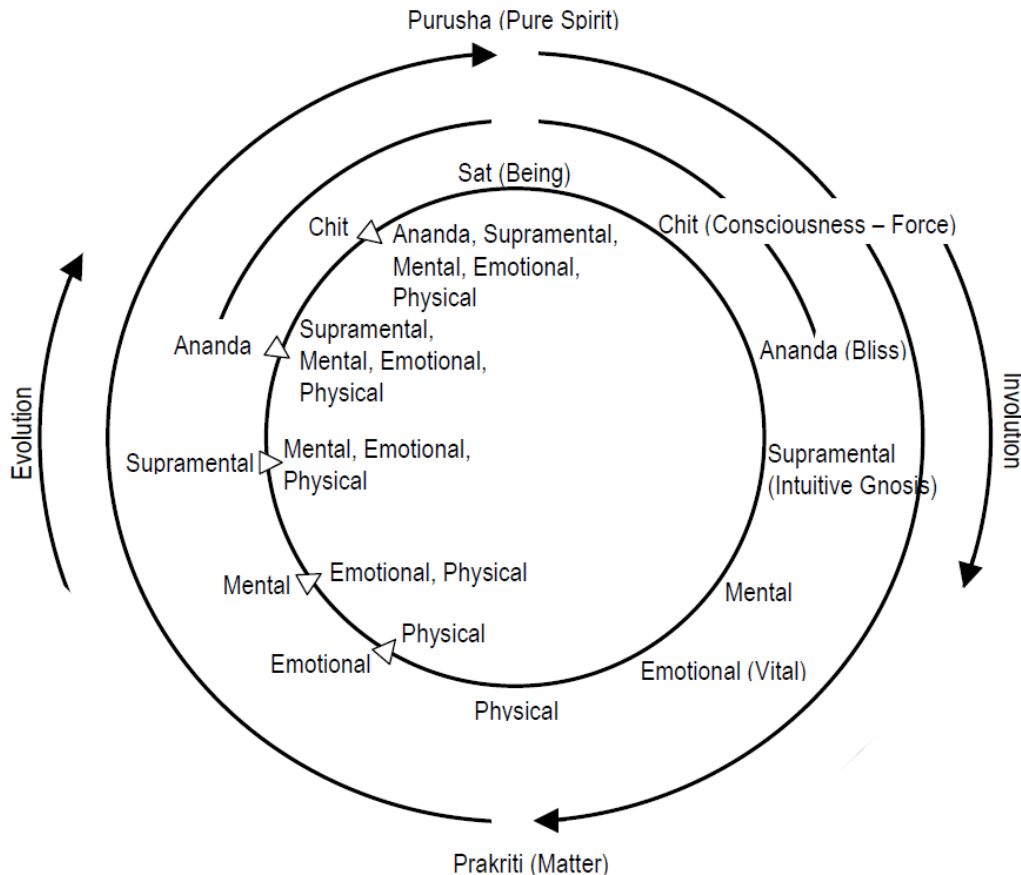
A well-run dialogue circle reminds me a little of a hydrological cycle, for dialogue presents an opportunity to observe how thought moves. Over the past two decades, I have had occasion to participate in many such circles that were expertly moderated by Blackfoot elder Leroy Little Bear. One of the participants in the circle, a Picuris and Southern Ute elder named Joseph Rael (also known as Beautiful Painted Arrow) eloquently described how he saw the movement of thought forms swirling colorfully through the room. While I was never able to see the physical thought forms, I was able to feel the presence of thought circulating. On innumerable occasions, I observed a thought pass through my mind a moment before someone else opened their mouth and gave voice to the same thought. This is what Bohm referred to as participatory consciousness, and the linguist Matthew Bronson called in one of the dialogues group knowledge construction.

Bohm recognized that participatory thought, while largely repressed in modern, Euro-American consciousness, might still be present within Indigenous societies. In the last year of his life, Bohm was invited to participate in a dialogue that was moderated by Little Bear. This dialogue, sponsored by the Fetzer Institute, brought together Western scientists (primarily physicists), Native elders, and linguists. As it turned out, I was blessed to inherit the tradition of these dialogues seven years later at the SEED Institute, an educational organization I founded. And while I agree with Bohm that participatory consciousness is repressed in Western culture, I am convinced that almost anyone can relearn to think this way within a dialogue circle if they (and the moderator) set the right intention. This is partly because of the archetypal effect of communication in circle, which harkens back to the ancient practice of telling stories around the fire. A circle is more than a symbol of wholeness. It embodies wholeness. It is inherently inclusive by allowing everyone to hear and see each other and by valuing every contribution as an aspect of the whole. A good moderator ensures that occurs.

Over the past two decades, I can testify that the dialogue process has profoundly changed my life and my thinking. In fact, I no longer think of my thoughts as “my thoughts.” I now recognize that thought is vibrational energy—that thought has a life of its own and like all vibration, is permanent and cannot be destroyed. Our thoughts are like the ripples that are created when we skip a stone on the surface of a pond. The ripples get bigger and bigger and then fainter and fainter, but they never really disappear. The same is true for thought. An original thought is not something new; it is only seen as original because it is so old it has been forgotten.

Structures of Consciousness

The way we once thought—the old ways, or old structures of consciousness—are never truly gone. The recapitulation of ancient wisdom will reappear through a vessel (which may or may not be human) at the appropriate time. Something like this happened when Jean Gebser and Sri Aurobindo (contemporaries who never met), both wrote about the structures of consciousness in the mid-twentieth century. Unlike the vast majority of philosophers who saw Nature as a teleological progression, both Gebser and Aurobindo understood that the unfoldment of newer structures of consciousness very much included the old—that the new did not make the old obsolete. For Gebser, the structures of unfolding consciousness were (translated as) “archaic; magical; mythical; mental; and integral.”^{xiv} Sri Aurobindo, who also used the term “integral” for a comprehensive method of yoga, wrote of the “physical, vital (emotional); mental; and supramental structures of consciousness.”^{xv} The ancient Vedic system is perhaps clearest for it includes the concept of a necessary and previous involution of consciousness before any evolution can unfold. This is why the lotus plant is sacred in India, because it enfolds in the muck and mire before it eventually unfolds and blossoms in the light. The path of the lotus mirrors the Vedic concept of Involution and Evolution. Spirit enfolds into physical matter (involution) before it and unfolds (evolution) in the inverse order in which it originally occurred. Thus, the highest forms of Spirit—Pure Spirit (purusha or Sat); Chit (consciousness); Ananda (bliss) are the first to enfold and the last to unfold. That is why we experience our yearning for Spirit as a journey home from whence we came.



The cycle of Involution and Evolution of consciousness is how Nature as a whole operates. Nature is a progression of iterative cycles (wheels within wheels), as the ancients spoke of, or a spiral progression. We can observe this all around us. A seed becomes root, bud, and fruit, and then goes to seed again only to begin the process all over when it is the right time to do so. This timing of Nature is real time. Human beings used to understand this. All our original ways of mirroring the timing of Nature—such as astrolabes and sundials—were mere attempts to replicate how Nature moved. Even after we invented the concept of linear or “absolute time” courtesy of Sir Issac Newton, our analog clocks were replicas of sun dials, one iteration away from movement of the sun. But when we went digital, we lost all connection to what is real time, and that is largely why we lost our ability to think like Nature thinks. We convinced ourselves we no longer needed to think that way because we had learned to accumulate knowledge. But the accumulation of knowledge or information will never equate to wisdom. If it could, then computers would be wise. No, wisdom is something else. The people I consider wise have a sense of presence. It is not the accumulation of life experience that has made them wise, but the way they have experienced life. They know how to think like Nature thinks. That is wisdom. They know what thoughts and actions are appropriate for any given time.

Ecopsychology, whether practiced in schools, or better still, by a gentle soul sitting in a forest glen, may just be a movement whose time has come. It is time for humanity to remember to think like Nature thinks. To do so, we will need to take a time out from the inexorable forces of progress, the economic engines that scream for our attention. This is the time to pause and reconsider the role of human beings in the world. This is the time to listen to what Nature wants to happen and then to align our will with that larger purpose. This is not an abrogation of free will; humans will always have free will. But hopefully, we have the intelligence to align our free will with the path of least resistance. We will learn to think like water thinks, and effortlessly correct our path. This is important. This is the time. May it be so, for us, and for all our relations we share this planet with.

ⁱ David Chalmers (1995). "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness". *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 2 (3): 200–219.

ⁱⁱ David Bohm. (1996). *On dialogue* (Lee Nichol, Ed.). New York: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buckminster Fuller (1965). Public lecture at Columbia University.

^{iv} Julie Thompson Klein. (1990). *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory & Practice*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

^v <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/playing-god-in-the-garden/>

Michael Pollan relates a story of how this suppressed fact allows GMO products to not be regulated by the FDA as food additives. “At the F.D.A., I was referred to James Maryanski, who oversees biotech food at the agency. I began by asking him why the F.D.A. didn’t consider Bt a food additive. Under F.D.A. law, any novel substance added to a food must — unless it is “generally regarded as safe” (“GRAS,” in F.D.A. parlance) — be thoroughly tested and if it changes the product in any way, must be labeled. “That’s easy,” Maryanski said. “Bt is a pesticide, so it’s exempt” from F.D.A. regulation. That is, even though a Bt potato is plainly a food, for the purposes of Federal regulation it is not a food but a pesticide and therefore falls under the jurisdiction of the E.P.A. This suppressed fact has enabled biogenetically engineered foods from being monitored by the FDA as food additives. at’s easy,” Maryanski said. “Bt is a pesticide, so it’s exempt” from F.D.A. regulation. That is, even though a Bt potato is plainly a food, for

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^{vi} <https://www.propublica.org/article/scientific-study-links-flammable-drinking-water-to-fracking>

^{vii} <https://thinkprogress.org/scientists-find-direct-link-between-earthquakes-and-process-used-for-oil-and-gas-drilling-978ce764850>

^{viii} Roszak, Theodore. (1992). *The Voice of the Earth*. Grand Rapids, MI. Phanes Press, pg 330.

^{ix} In 2013, Eugene Fama, the originator of the efficient market hypothesis that claimed that it was impossible to predict or time the stock market, shared the prize with Robert Shiller, who is one of the biggest critics of the efficient market hypothesis.

^x Niels Bohr. BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2016.

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/n/nielsbohr129177.html>, accessed August 29, 2016. The Indian sage Sri Aurobindo said something quite similar.

^{xi} Herman Daly and John Cobb. (1989). *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, p. 139.

^{xii} Herman Daly and John Cobb (1989). *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, p. 47.

^{xiii} Bruce Wilshire. (1990). *The moral collapse of the university*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

^{xiv} Jean Gebser. (1985). *The ever-present origin* (N. Barstad with Algis Mickunas, Trans.). Athens: Ohio University Press. (Translation from rev. ed., 1978; originally published in 1949 as *Ursprung und Gegenwart*)

^{xv} Aurobindo Ghose. (1977). *The life divine*. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press.