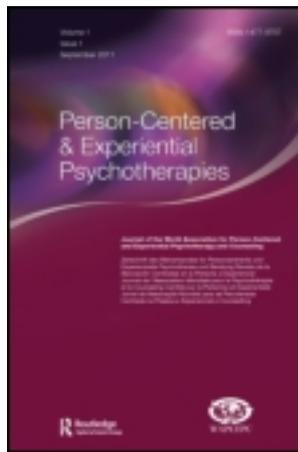


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Vital signs: psychological responses to ecological crisis

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BOOK REVIEWS

Vital signs: psychological responses to ecological crisis, edited by Mary-Jane Rust & Nick Totton, London, Karnac, 2011, 336 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1780490489

A stimulating, inspiring and disappointing read in equal measure, this book is presented throughout with an ambivalence which is plain from the very start. Are we “deathbed attendants” to the planet or “midwives” (p. xv) to a new chapter of life on earth? We do not know. We *cannot* know. Gathering an extensive collection of contributions, the book admirably refrains, on the whole, from providing simplistic answers to the ecological crisis. Yet the pervasive stance of “not knowing” professed by many of the writers spawns a great deal of knowledge that is all-too reliant on makeshift metaphysics. For this reason, the book reflects a little more than mere ambivalence. If, on the one hand, the plurality of views on ecology and ecopsychology on display works beautifully as reference material for the practising psychotherapist and/or eco-activist, this reader was also left in a state of confusion, trying to grapple with wildly contradicting claims.

The central tenet, variously articulated by the many contributors, appears to be “interdependence” or “interconnectedness.” These two synonyms are employed at various points as expression of a “new paradigm” of “organic and systemic metaphors” (p. 34) placed against reductionist science whose mechanical perspective is seen as the culprit of the ecological crisis. The theoretical frame for such a reductive view is (correctly, I think) attributed to the body/mind Cartesian dualism and more importantly to Descartes’ separation of the mind (the “thinking thing”) from the world (the “extended thing”). However, none of the authors in this book (and very few in the current ecological debate) make the obvious link between Descartes’ position and Christianity. The Cartesian separation between mind and body entirely depends on the Christian idea of the “soul” and on the alleged superiority of humankind over other inhabitants of planet earth. The allegedly “more certain” and separate nature of the mind with regards to the body (considered as unreliable “matter”) is intrinsically linked to the Christian separation between the purity of an eternal soul above and beyond an imperfect and transient body. This and other metaphysical lacunae place the book, in spite of some of the contributors’ radical claims, into a rather cosy and generic “pro-nature” niche.

The book manages to say all the right things without posing serious challenges. Interdependence is a potentially radical notion, but what emerges from the book is instead an ecological refrain that essentially says: “We have lost our sense of interconnectedness and we need to regain it, recovering our sense of belonging to the Earth, our interdependence with all living beings.” Most contributors see anthropocentrism (human-centeredness) as the culprit. There are, as far I can see, at least two problems with this stance. The first one, which can be defined as “romantic subjectivism,” is perfectly illustrated by Viola Sampson’s beautifully written first chapter “The darkening quarter” (pp. 3–16). Through the lyrical account of an autumn evening, Sampson describes the times we live in as a time of bright darkness. For Sampson, the image “hold[s] a paradox of two apparently contradictory truths that can let us expand beyond the dualistic mode of thinking so common in our culture” (p. 14). The beauty of the prose is very seductive and I wanted to go along with the author’s

claims. But the poetic, subjective touch slowly gives way to improvised and rather rigid metaphysics. Copernicus stands accused of “spark[ing] the scientific revolution” (p. 6) and ushering in all sort of malevolent things in the process. For Sampson, Copernicus’ heliocentrism must be reoriented towards the earth, towards humans and finally towards ... “me.” The lyricism of the style perhaps does not conceal that what is advocated here is the most naive human-centeredness and self-centeredness – the very cause of the problem. Compare the above position with the following famous passage:

In some remote corner of the universe ... there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of ‘world history’ – yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. (Nietzsche in Thacker, 2013, p. 51)

A useful thing ecology can do is to temper our hubris and remind us of how the importance of humans has been greatly exaggerated in the great scheme of things, something that some authors (particularly Dodds and Jordan, discussed below), do address competently in the book. But they are in a minority.

Disputing the ontological naïveté present in many chapters did not close my heart to the genuineness of intent present throughout this book: “Activism arises out of love” (p. 15), Simpson writes. How can anyone disagree with that? But this is still work in progress and much more is needed than a plea to all things wild, spontaneous, and subjective.

The second problem is the linking of “interdependence” with the Buddha’s teaching of *paticca samuppada* (p. 261) a.k.a. “dependent arising,” understood via the interpretation of Joanna Macy, an author quoted approvingly throughout the book. However, Macy’s reading of dependent arising is only one of a myriad of interpretations, adopted by a certain strand of ecopsychology and ecophilosophy alongside Naess’ view of the “ecological self” (pp. 64–65, among other quotations).

Another aspect of *paticca samuppada* is a *relativization* of the human self. The paradox here is that the self is seen both as unsubstantial (existing only as convergence and falling apart of aggregates) and existentially alone. This aloneness is inescapable (no one else can die my death, no matter how “interdependent” I might be) and even desirable – for one, less attractive aspect of interdependence is *entanglement*. Valuing aloneness and eschewing entanglement is, however, both controversial and nearly incomprehensible a notion in a cultural and psychological landscape (largely reflected in the book) bent on one-sided eulogy of the dialogical and the relational.

Chris Robertson mentions social justice in passing in his thoughtful and inspiring piece “Dangerous Margins” (pp. 265–278), a chapter which adds gravitas and beauty to the book. There is no mention in the entire book of *new materialism*, a set of exciting new ways of rethinking “matter” as “materiality,” i.e. endowed with its own intelligence, hence not reducible to the Newtonian division which sees nature as mechanical and “conquerable.”

The book is overwhelmingly psychodynamic in orientation. Incidentally, ecopsychology might well be an area where contemporary person-centered theory can contribute something valuable, as there are interesting links to be made between new materialism and the immanent vitality present in the notion of the actualizing tendency.

The book does not mention the “eco-anarchism” of Murray Bookchin and others, nor is there any reference to the pioneering work of eco-activist, writer and Zen practitioner Gary Snyder (to mention only two conspicuous absences). In their own ways, both Bookchin and Snyder opened up ecophilosophy to more radical and far-reaching areas that go well beyond a generic romantic gesture of interdependence with nature.

The saving grace comes in the form of two chapters in the arbitrarily named “The View from Postmodernism” (in Part III, pp. 119–145), penned by Joseph Dodds and Martin Jordan who draw respectively from Deleuze/Guattari and Lacan, offering a much needed critique to the ontological claims of the book. This is refreshing: ecopsychology needs eco-critique. In “The Ecology of Phantasy” (pp. 119–132) Joseph Dodds refers to “dark ecology,” based on a “melancholy ethics,” which counterbalances the militant naiveté of other chapters.

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The life of things: therapy and the soul of the world, by Bernie Neville, Ross-on-Wye, PCCS Books, 2011, 203 pp., £18.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1906254469

It has been said that the outline map of the United States resembles a coffee-can, previously tipped up so that all the dregs bottomed out in Southern California. It has also been said that Carl Rogers’ mental faculties paralleled this Californian nose-diving process when he opted to leave the strait-laced surroundings of the American mid-west, birthplace of his copper-bottomed, evidence-based “scientific” ideas, and settle instead among the loony luminaries, surfing sages, and mystic misfits grooving on “the Coast” – notwithstanding that this period of Carl’s “Californication” included time hanging out with some of the world’s leading physical scientists at the California Institute of Technology.

Combining in this period mystical California dreamings with newly acquired knowledge from the realm of physical science, Rogers keenly latched onto the views of such individuals as Fritjof Capra; notably Capra’s contention that the modern physicist’s view of the universe as “a dynamic, inseparable whole which always includes the observer in an essential way... is very similar to that of Eastern mystics” (quoted in Rogers, 1980, p. 130).

Specifically, Rogers envisaged a counselling client’s self-actualizing increase in awareness – as facilitated by the “core” therapist conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence – to be “consonant with the directional evolutionary flow,” a case at root of mystical attunement with “a strong formative tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels” in terms of complex forms emerging from simpler forebears (Rogers, 1980, pp. 128, 134). Such, dreamed Rogers, was the all-pervading order or “intelligent design” logic to the creative process responsible for forming the cosmos as a seamless dynamic whole inclusive of ourselves. Barmy views, of course, from the mainstream perspective of today’s neo-Darwinian dice-throwing Dawkinites. But not barmy at all in the opinion of intrepid Bernie Neville (2011), author of “*The life of things: Therapy and the soul of the world.*”

However, what becomes readily apparent as one delves into this book is that the reason Neville doesn’t regard Rogers’ mystical metaphysics as barmy is because Neville is *even more barmy* than Rogers. Uniting Rogers’ hypothesis of the formative tendency with some