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The Human Element: Transpersonal Ecology, Empathy Gap, and the Environment

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Abstract: Warwick Fox's (1990) Transpersonal Ecology proposes that the Earth could be saved by psychologizing the problem of ecophilosophy and recognizing the value of transcendental self-expansion and identification with nature. It could help enlighten human beings with regards to their position in the ecosphere, and it could help for a holistic policy-making. Unfortunately, there is a phenomenon called the Empathy Gap which is the reason why human beings find difficulty empathizing with people they cannot relate to. This paper posits that one of the solutions to the viability of Transpersonal Ecology is by recognizing and acting upon the problem of the Empathy Gap. It should be discussed because of the persistent apathy of human beings when it comes to environmental conservation and preservation efforts and how the technological era has enabled the constant development of machines and such for the convenience of human beings. Therefore, Transpersonal Ecology will be discussed, then the criticisms of Chet Bowers (regarding how Fox did not take into account the cultural influences to identity formation) and Stavely & McNamara (as to how Fox put too much emphasis on identification and how his proposals do not translate to the conservation of the Earth) will be given so as to be the backdrop of the Empathy Gap (as seen in Decety and Jackson's 2004 paper) and the Empathy Gap (which was discussed in Gutsell and Inzlicht's 2012 research) discussion. This paper will also assume that the Empathy Gap is applicable to non-relational beings as well, such as the environment.

Key Words: Transpersonal Ecology; Empathy Gap; Ecological Self; Environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Transpersonal Ecology is the psychologically-based idea of transcendental self-expansion to accommodate the ecosphere (Fox, 1990, p.59). To be able to better understand the discussion, the popular tripartite conception of the self will be given as an overview.

First of all is the *desiring-impulsive aspect* (Fox, p. 59) which is similar to Freud's conception

of the *Id*. This is the kind of self that is more often than not stressed when it comes to human relations to the environment, because it is the aspect that is concerned with exploitation and expansionism. It is the aspect that is all about wanting something and wanting it immediately, therefore it also deals with the idea of domination in which human beings are built to exercise mastery over nature. It functions without regard for the welfare of others as it taps



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into the most primitive side of the human being. Second is the *rationalizing-deciding aspect* (Fox, p.61) which is similar to the idea of the *Ego*. This aspect is in charge of the environmental conservation and preservation efforts because it sees itself as the control center with regards to the three selves. The “rationalizing” part of this aspect works in two ways: as a guardian of self-image, and as a searcher of the most efficient solution to the demands of reality and of the other two psyches (Fox, p. 62). This is where the mini-max strategy (Fox, p. 62) comes in. All disciplines concerned with decision theory – and also the individual self – adopt this strategy because it is considered to be the most rational. The *rationalizing-deciding aspect* recognizes that it is in fact unrealistic to acknowledge the 1) desire for maximum resource exploitation, 2) existence of reality-imposed constraints, and 3) certain moral demands (Fox, p. 63). The mini-max strategy then attempts to satisfy the first demand while taking the other two factors into account. The third and final side is the *normative-judgmental aspect* (Fox, p. 66) which is likened to the *Superego*. The first two aspects posit that the nonhuman world is meant for human consumption, but the last aspect posits that the environment has its own intrinsic value (Fox, p. 73). This means that doing right by the environment should ultimately be imperative regardless of how one feels. The final aspect then, demands that the intrinsic values should override all the other factors which are taken into account when deciding what to do.

2. TRANSPERSONAL ECOLOGY

However, Transpersonal Ecology shows itself to be different because it does not promote the tripartite conception of the self. The proponents of this idea believe that this conception is ultimately narrow and atomistic, while the transpersonal self is expansive and all-inclusive (Fox, p. 68). It sees that the first and second aspect of the tripartite self are simply two sides of the same coin, except the *rationalizing-deciding aspect* is simply better at utilizing its self-serving tendencies. The *normative-judgmental aspect* of the self seems like it is the

best when compared to the other two aspects, however it is still simply a mere aspect of the self. The moral demands of this last aspect may seem useful especially for the issue of environmental conservation, however the problem is what it emphasizes is the idea that there is a self that is a center of volitional activity. A transpersonal self may show volitional activity but to force this sense of self (Fox, p. 69) through moral demands is counterproductive and frankly, ironic. The idea of a transpersonal self is against the usual moral “ought” that the field of Ethics imposes; it proposes that if one already has achieved (or is on their way to achieving) a wide, expansive sense of self, then one will naturally protect the natural unfolding of this expansive self in all its aspects (Fox, p. 70). This means that the moral “ought” should be unnecessary because the identification of oneself with nature should be the one that will motivate the human being to care for nature, not some order imposed by Ethics. A violation of nature *should* hurt, in the same way that pain caused to a person’s family hurts the person, therefore the human being will take care of nature because caring for nature *is* caring for the Self.

Transpersonal Ecology does not simply deal with the usual moral demands; however, it does deal with the holistic growth of a person (Fox, p. 77). Once a human being realizes that one does not simply lock himself in himself and orders himself around to keep up with his moral duties, but instead strives to become the best version of himself while stretching his own ego boundaries to accommodate nature and in turn, identify himself with it, he naturally grows to love and care for that which is *he*, not *his*.

2.1. Identification

The important thing when it comes to discussing Transpersonal Ecology is the idea of identification. Identification here does not equate to identity; it simply means having a sense of commonality (Fox, 81). Just because one realizes that one is in unity with the ecosphere, it does not automatically mean that one is literally a tree. What humans should realize is that their sense of self could be expanded to include the ecosphere, but they will only remain interlinked, not mashed into a single homogenous substance. It goes against the usual conception of the self that is opposed to nature, a Man vs. Wild scenario. In fact, it is this kind of thinking that ultimately damages nature,

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which in turn damages ourselves. Identification makes one realize that an all-encompassing sense of unity is possible, provided that the human being does not simply depend on the visual boundaries that he has. Human beings are limited by their bodies, but their experiences could help stretch their sense of self to include someone else – and in this case, to include the ecosphere (Fox, p. 86). Boundaries are arbitrary, but that is exactly why human beings are capable of transcending the usual narrow sense of self; humans *are* capable of love, and what is love but a deliberate extension of one's self-concept to include someone else (Peck, 1990)?

There are three bases of Identification (Fox, 1991, p. 3) that is discussed in Transpersonal Ecology. First is the Personal, in which experiences of commonality with other entities are brought about by personal involvement. In other words, the identification happens through constant contact. Those we experience – such as our families or our countries – become a part of our identity. However, Personally-based Identification – as the name suggests – is less transpersonal than personal. The second one is the Ontological, which refers to experiences of commonality with all that *is* through the deep-seated realization of the fact that things *are*. The Ontologically-based Identification is about the depth of impression that an entity's existence leaves on the human being, which happens when the human realizes that the Earth does not exist for a self-serving purpose or for anyone at all, except for its own existence, which is how humans are as well. Third is the Cosmological, which refers to experiences of commonality with all that *is*, brought about by the deep-seated realization that all entities including ourselves are aspects of a single, unfolding reality. There are quite a couple of cosmological narratives (Fox, p. 4), one of which is Science. One of its studies is about the human place in the universe, and not only that but it also studies the universe itself and its own processes and development, which in turn gives people the motivation to look at this process as a single, unfolding reality (Fox, p. 4). It is humbling to realize that human beings are not at the apex of anything, but rather all entities coexist and are parts of each other, and in a sense – *are* each other.

3. CRITICISMS

3.1. On Culture and Identity

What Chet Bowers wanted to ask in his critique of Transpersonal Ecology is this: is it truly so viable that it would transcend traditions and change cultural patterns? (Bowers, 1993, p. 3) From his standpoint, it seems as if Fox never addressed the question of the theory's practical application on the numerous cultures that the world holds. He mentions that Fox's readers seem to be those who could simply break away from their culture, or those whose cultures are on a fast-track to modern thinking. But the thing is not all nations work that way, and not all nations employ the Western notion of culture liberation.

There are three aspects of culture that Bowers discussed in his critique: 1) cultural storage, 2) ideology, and 3) semiotics.

Cultural storage is in a sense, tradition. Tradition has been there since even before the individual comes into the picture; she is born into it, *it* referring to mental and cultural processes which have been developed and passed down for generations before she is even conceived. This tradition then serves as the foundation of one's viewpoint regarding the world – one's lens if you will. One can only answer the question of one's duty when one already has a sense of one's narrative, which is the collective narrative that one is born into. Fox's idea of self-identity does not take this into account; not everyone has the agency and freedom to be able to do what he wants with disregard for one's culture. Even Fox's use of words are Westernized, which is problematic considering how all cultures may have their own interpretations of both the problem and the solution that he proposed.

The ideological aspect of culture is the schema that is refined through discourse and social practice, which in turn brings out the political aspects of each symbol system in a given culture (Bowers, p. 8). What this spells out for Fox, again, is a misunderstanding of his problems and proposed solutions when seen through specific ideologies – which all cultures have. There will be set beliefs and core assumptions which will have to be abandoned in favor of a new cultural backdrop if one is to live the lifestyle that is being proposed. Bowers believes that the acknowledgment of the different cultures and ideologies is necessary for the entire system to work – in other words, the solution is to contextualize.

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The semiotic aspect deals with the person's reality and identity as a social construct created by language and communication. It is important to note that the second a human being is born, there are already ideas that shape that person's reality through communicative outlets such as TV commercials, the language in the area, the color scheme in the house, common expressions, and so on. Therefore, the problem of Transpersonal Ecology is far more complex than Fox makes it seem.

3.2. *On Identification and Viability*

Stavelly & McNamara's issue with Fox's Transpersonal Ecology is his reliance on the different processes of Identification to create his solution instead of focusing on the non-volitional aspects of the self (Stavelly & McNamara, 1992, p. 204).

They critiqued Fox's Identification by saying that many, if not most, transpersonal events are in actuality opposite to identification (Stavelly & McNamara, p. 207). They happen to be outside of the control of the self – from mystical and religious experiences to even that of dreams. But Fox's argument seems to stem from the idea that it is the human's job to identify himself with the ecosphere, instead of letting the transpersonal event transpire effortlessly. Stavelly & McNamara argue that it seems to be anthropomorphic since the most important events all transpire within the individual. They propose that instead of focusing on the individual, the focus must be on nature itself – that it is not simply waiting on the human being's sudden wake-up call to a transpersonal identification with it, but that it is alive, active, and out of the human being's control.

Another critique of the pair is the effect of the so-called "steadfast friendliness" that Fox thinks will be promoted by Transpersonal Ecology. They argue that being enlightened has never been, in any way, a guarantee of social change. Even when enlightenment is a central cultural value, it is still not a guarantee as to the overall behavior of the population (Stavelly & McNamara, p. 209). Only a select few will truly choose and power through to attain the idea of transpersonal sense of Self that

lives in harmony with all entities. Also, it would be unfair to not recognize that the self is not just an individual's conception but also a social construct. If Transpersonal Ecology were to succeed, the culture of the group must be taken into account.

4. PROPOSED SOLUTION

4.1. *On Empathy*

Empathy is the sense of similarity of the feelings one experiences and those that are expressed by others, without losing sight of whose feelings belong to whom. (Decety & Jackson, 2004, p.71). Empathic concern is often associated with those who are either genetically hardwired to care for their blood, such as their offspring. Empathy functions as a chief enabling process to altruism, which is the practice of selfless action for the well-being of others. But even though there are certain benefits to acting on one's empathic tendencies, there are obvious costs to this extended self-concept such as having anxieties due to unpleasant situations happening to other people, and the thing is unpleasant situations happen countless times over the course of one's life.

Empathy has three main components: 1) the affective aspect, 2) the cognitive aspect, and 3) the regulatory mechanisms to keep track of the origin of the feelings (Decety & Jackson, p. 73). Although there are quite few evidences of the neurophysiological processes involved when it comes to measuring the more complex emotions, psychotherapeutic schools saw that it was in fact important to put oneself in another's shoes. Decety & Jackson quoted Theodor Reik in the rundown of the processes involved in empathy: 1) Identification, 2) Incorporation, 3) Reverberation, and 4) Detachment. Identification speaks of the complete engrossment of one towards another, while incorporation is about the internalization of another's experiences. Reverberation is about experiencing the other's experience while minding own's own thoughts and feelings towards the situation, and detachment is the final necessary

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step; it is the recognition of separation of one person from another so as to be able to give the proper response to the “shared” experience.

4.2 The Empathy Gap

Empathy Gap is the idea that this intuitive mechanism is limited only to those we like (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 596). As seen in modern societies, prejudices and violent acts still abound – which would not be possible if human beings were perfectly capable of tapping into their natural instinct to connect with and share the emotions of other people. This, then, gave rise to the idea of the *outgroup*.

According to the perception-action model of empathy, empathy is based on neural simulation (Gutsell & Inzlicht, p. 596). Seeing another person express their emotion is bound to trigger similar neural networks which would help the observer share the other person’s emotional state. However, studies show that this is (although not strictly) limited to those in the *ingroup*. An fMRI study has shown that neural activations are more prominent when members of the ingroup are hurt, but they are barely firing when the members of the outgroup are experiencing the same thing (Gutsell & Inzlicht, p. 597).

However, instead of reading these as a reflection of preference, some researchers viewed them as culturally learned prejudices (Gutsell & Inzlicht, p. 597). Participants who had high social dominance traits showed a profound empathy gap when seeing other people subjected to pain. The gap was severe, however, towards culturally disliked outgroups, suggesting that the empathy gap was more of a product or function of culture than preference. But although that is the case, those who seem to have high empathy were capable of empathizing with *both* the ingroup members and the outgroup members. This shows that there *are* people who were able to somehow, transcend the empathy gap (Gutsell & Inzlicht, p. 601).

These studies have shown that there is in fact, a bias against outgroups – human beings are culturally conditioned to empathize less (if at all)

with those that are outside of their own groups, unless if they were able to reach empathy maturation. If this is the case, then what about the environment? What about the non-relational being that is the Earth?

5. CONCLUSIONS

Seeing as how both criticisms against Transpersonal Ecology mentioned the problem of culture, the issue of the empathy gap could be seen as a potential solution to the two problems. What humans tend to forget is that even before they were culturally segregated, they already had their own neurological processes. Gutsell and Inzlicht’s study showed that it *is* in fact, possible to transcend one’s cultural prejudices through the development of one’s empathy. This may be done through constant interaction and the formation of emotional bonds. It is understandable that this would be difficult, considering how trees and other non-relational aspects of nature do not have the ability to share their own emotional experiences with the human beings, but if one would simply find the time to listen to what the Earth is trying to say, then perhaps humans would be able to foster a feeling of connectedness with nature, which in turn will fire a neurological response whenever nature is being misused and harmed. The study of the empathy gap proves that apathy, in fact, is not innate and permanent – only learned. And if it is learned, then humans are certainly capable of learning its opposite.

Another objection is Staveland & McNamara’s statement of Transpersonal Ecology being anthropocentric, but this was already discussed in Fox’s earlier paper. Although Transpersonal Ecology deals with the human element, it still promotes the idea that the ecosphere, whether showing human-like characteristics or not, should be treated as one with the Self (Fox, 1990, p.89). It is all-inclusive; not biased towards relational beings. Therefore, it should be understood that although the human element is the one that is discussed, it would be quite difficult to simply be passive when it comes to transpersonal identification. Transpersonal Ecology acknowledges that nature is alive and that it is valuable on its own, but the popular tripartite conception of the self does not necessarily see it that way, and that is why one

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should spend time outdoors and actually experience nature in all its glory so as to realize that we are in fact, a mere aspect of a wondrous whole. Human beings *are* capable of transcending themselves and their cultures, and if they could transcend the empathy gap towards a human outgroup who are capable of showing and acting on their prejudices against another group, then it is certainly viable to be able to transcend an empathy gap towards the environment in which all human beings reside. Transpersonal Ecology is an acknowledgment of the fact that human beings are made of the same component as stars: it is the idea that although humans are vastly different from one another, and definitely more different from the ecosphere, they are still – in a way – invariably linked together.

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