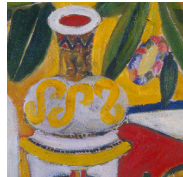


Listening to the Voice of the Earth: an (Eco) Psychology for the Climate Emergency

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Article



Abstract

This article examines the ecological roots of Jungian thought. Bringing Jung, Hillman, and Merrit's perceptions of the relationship between the psyche and the living world to which it belongs into focus is crucial in our time when human action has caused perhaps irreversible disturbances to the balance of the planet. The Jungian clinical approach, in embracing the massive environmental challenge, is moving towards an (Eco)Psychology. There is no shortage of elements for tackling such an urgent challenge.

Keywords: Climate emergency; Ecopsychology; Deep Ecology; Ecocide; Arrogance.

Introduction

Back when Hillman (1995a) said that after 100 years of psychotherapy, the world was getting worse and worse, he had considered the ecological disaster that Western society had left in its wake. However, the information he knew about climate emergencies, which mark a potentially irreversible phase of disaster, had come from reading and talking about scientific reports. Hillman also lived in a time of regular seasons, without the frequent extreme weather episodes that we are beginning to experience and witness more and more regularly. What Hillman knew – and what science warned about – came to be called “the new normal”.

Now, because we are experiencing the effects of climate change, the still-reluctant denialist talk about its non-existence is bordering on irresponsible and even ridiculous. Hillman's work implied that the field of psychotherapy needed to rethink itself. Yet one aspect of this rethinking has quickly become urgent: our relationship with the planet that has mothered us all through our individual and collective existence. Von Franz showed how this revisionist agenda

was embedded in Jung's heart. He claimed that in the later decades of his life:

"Personal injuries... did not affect him as much as the suffering in the contemporary world, the devastation of nature, the problems of overpopulation, war, the rape of still flourishing non-Christian cultures by the brutality of modern technology. For Jung, these problems were an agony that kept him constantly and tirelessly searching for any possibility of a healing transformation that could emerge from the depths of the psyche." (von Franz, 1998).

Jung died on June 6, 1961, and never got to witness what he knew was coming: a powerful collective ecological consciousness, which erupted just a year after his death. In 1962, an American biologist, who had become famous for her popular articles and radio programs on marine life that delighted audiences, published a work on the effects of pesticides, one of the pillars of agricultural monoculture, on the food chain. Rachel Carson's (2010) research showed that the toxic substances accumulated in the organisms that encountered them, passing from poisoned insects into the bodies of birds, weakening the chemical structure of their eggs and preventing the safe development of their offspring. These substances were also found in breast milk and were associated with various health problems. This 1962 work marks the dawn of the contemporary ecological movement.

Jung's ecological awareness, featured in many of his writings, spawned works and articles that highlighted a strand of Jungian thought, called by Dennis Meritt (2012) a Jungian ecopsychology. Jung recognized the deep connection between inner and outer nature. He viewed the rootedness of the psyche in the world of nature as key to his conception of the human being, and he did so not just through an intellectual delving into the foundations of being, but through direct experience. His gaze on nature was that of an old man full of ecological wisdom, with deep insights into the unity between psyche and nature.

The article entitled *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary* (Naess, 1973) is an influential milestone in the development of the ecological movement. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess describes the activist position that attempts to reduce the impact of consumer society on ecosystems – shallow ecology – and the activist position that dares a radical philosophical exercise to find in the human mind the causes of the behaviors that destroy these ecosystems – deep ecology. Following this article and a series of other publications, the Deep Ecology movement emerged, at once an area of environmental philosophy and a social movement that proposed a change in the way we think about the planet. One of its ideas was to assume that all species of living beings have an inherent value that is not linked to our economic interests in them. He also proposed that we should reduce our presence on the planet

if our excessive existence implies a reduction in the rights of other species to also exist. Naess saw the anthropocentric perspective as the root of environmentally dysfunctional thinking.

A deep ecology calls for a deep psychology and it is within this conceptual framework that I see Jungian thought entering the arena of ecological thinking. Firstly, by pointing out that, at the root of the ecological crisis, there is a psychic structure marked by a deep cultural complex, which makes us beings who think of themselves as disconnected from the natural world. Secondly, by realizing, as Hillman (1995a) did, that our ways of working may be re-enacting the anthropocentric cultural complex that disconnects us from the web of life. There is a deep urgency for Jungian (eco)psychology and (eco)psychotherapy to care for the wound of disconnection. This wound is mirrored in the political and economic relationships with which our species relates to the web of life, which ends up transferring our inner wound to it, intoxicating it with products, extinguishing species, disrupting ecosystems, and ultimately even climate stability.

The idea that the wounds inflicted on the planet are closely linked to the wounds of the soul is the core argument for Jungian ecopsychotherapy. Not only are they associated, but in an almost synchronistic fashion, these wounds mirror each other. The scenes of environmental devastation, the burning of tropical forests, savannahs, and wetlands, and extinctions, which are worsening while the psychiatric symptoms of human populations increase, are all sides of the same coin. However, it seems rather difficult to assimilate such a notion at present. Not that there is anything wrong with it. It is just that the cultural complex of patriarchal anthropocentrism has conditioned our perception to overlook the link that connects us to the living world, making us desensitized while keeping the way open for the destructive exploitation of the web of life.

It would be a professional disaster if, at such a critical moment in history, any Jungian analyst were to remain unaware of this link between the human psyche, embodied in an organic system comprised of the same compounds as the planet, and the very planet that gave us motherhood by endowing us with its biochemistry and a peculiar expression of its psyche that we call the human mind. Within the urban-industrial-and-consumer society, we are enduring an unfair relationship of abuse with this great mother, which affects us all. It is shaped as a disintegration of the omnipresent biotic family by the ecocidal arrogance of a species that, no longer guided by instinct, is capable of ecologically unwise choices, since its knowledge is nowhere near the ancestral ecological wisdom that has allowed our species to safely reach this moment in history. A Jungian analyst is as much a product of his time as his patient unless he has stripped himself of misconceptions, and beliefs in dissonance with the movements of the soul or with the courses of action of the web of life. In the former

case, Jungian analysts who embody ecological alienation in their work, unaware of it, will work from an anthropocentric perspective and in favor of the urban-industrial-and-consumption perspective, unconcerned about the self-destructive course of this approach.

In the second case, the picture is quite different. The analyst who manages to bridge the gap between the individual psyche and the collective psyche, and adds to this bond their belonging to the great mother and the ethical demands of this belonging, will become a revolutionary force for the preservation of the biosphere. The delicate web of life is embedded in his thinking, his living, and his professional work. Not only his practical choices in daily life but also his professional performance convey Jung's own awareness of our psychic connection to the world of nature. The potential tragic outcome of the climate crisis, for example, is encapsulated in the following statement: "Nature may not win the game, but it cannot lose." (JUNG, OC XIII, § 229).

Aligned with the ecological wisdom laid out in the well-known Letter from Chief Seattle (Perry, 2007), a classic of ecological literature, which claims that whatever happens to the Earth will happen to Earth's children, Jung makes it clear that we are not living in a game in which either the exploitative mentality wins or nature wins. If nature loses, it is simply the end of life. In other words, it is the suicide of the tormented mind that pursues the goals of superiority, greed, and domination that Zoja (2000) referred to as arrogance, our tale of loss of limits. Pressured by its pain, its emptiness, its inner sense of smallness replaced by the external trappings of supposed greatness, the tormented contemporary mind is unconsciously arranging its end of the line.

Western humans no longer need superiority over nature, be it outside them or inside them. For they already have both to an almost demonic perfection. What they lack is the conscious acknowledgment of their inferiority to the nature around them and within themselves. They must learn that they cannot do exactly as they wish. If they fail to learn this, their own nature will destroy them. They are unaware that their own soul is rebelling against them in a suicidal way. (JUNG, OC XI/5, § 870).

The ecological crisis must be understood as a symptom. Roszak (2001) asked what Freud, Jung, or Sullivan would think of a CEO who kicks himself to make another million, whilst sweeping away the rainforests. He added to this the idea that we live in a so-called normal madness, which is the result of the repression of what he called the ecological unconscious. For him, this is a dimension of the psyche that holds the history of the evolution of life and, therefore, the source of our sense of belonging, loyalty, and reciprocity towards the great mother. In the tormented mentality that seeks its self-dissolution, both the sense of belonging and those of loyalty and reciprocity

are absent. It is dramatic to think that it is this mentality that is, at this very moment, making the political and economic decisions that affect us all.

A Jungian ecopsychotherapy must acknowledge that there is a serious collective illness in progress that is not restricted to anyone but stems from certain traits of the dominant culture. Therefore, it is urgent to take a critical look at this cultural complex of ecological disconnection, heir to the patriarchal-imperial-colonial-capitalist-modernist tradition focused on competition and power, starting from what this complex suppresses. The analyst must first recognize the subtleties of the disconnection complex itself, for it is in all of us to some degree, as it could not be otherwise since we are children of this tradition. However, this is only the first step towards restoring health, a concept that must be broadened and understood as a reflection of the quality of relationships. Understanding health as associated with the quality of relationships, if stripped of its anthropocentric bias, will reveal multiple layers of relationships that are full of meaning, but which have been left in the shadows in the era of the climate emergency: relationships with the planet.

As is well known, relationships arise between entities, but when it comes to a non-human entity like the planet, we could easily think that this is a one-way relationship. After all, a planet is an astrophysical entity that does not belong to the field of human relationships. Because of our tradition of knowledge inspired by patriarchal lineage, there is no psyche outside the human mind. Hillman (1995b) reminds us that 19th-century physiologists believed that animals did not feel pain, since such sensitivity is inherent only to psychic functioning. Not by chance, slaves and indigenous people were also denied the status of beings with souls. The cultural complex of disconnection with nature runs deeper and extends to disconnecting with whatever is perceived as different and a potential target for power, control, and exploitation. Since the 19th century, much has evolved in terms of recognizing animals as sentient beings (Low et al., 2012); however, human sensitivity to animal sentience is conveniently dampened and ridiculed in the arena of livestock farming, for example. These animals are also denied the status of sentient beings, allowing the abusive and brutal relationship we witnessed with humans in the Holocaust, slavery, and Indigenous extermination to be reenacted daily with a species different from us. Clearly, the mentality at the root of climate collapse is just the latest and current example of its approach to what is perceived only as something exploitable and devoid of any rights. The image of the blue planet captured by astronaut William Anders' camera in 1968 objectified yet another body that suffers the consequences of unhealthy relationships: that blue body dancing in dark space, while bringing everything to life, is the last stronghold of the war that the tormented mentality is waging against its own destiny.

It was once believed that our ancestors were members of their village, their family, and their territory, and only in their own little realm of life did they believe they could leave their mark. However, the findings of science have shown that nothing could be further from the truth. Everything influences everything. This field perspective remains absent in the mindset tormented by the pursuit of gain and power. Hence the seemingly unbridgeable conflict between the economy and the ecological. The former does not fit into the latter, its natural place, due to the lack of understanding that there is nothing outside the relationships of the web of life. Jung expressed this understanding as follows:

The soul suicidal turning is a self-regulating mechanism attempting to restore that sensitive perception that recognizes the soul of what we relate to. This sensitive perception is torn apart by the brutality arising from the inflation of the ego at war with its inner nature and outer nature, the core trait of the patriarchal-imperial-colonial-consumerist mindset. The objectification of the magnificent web of life and consciousness that we call nature walks hand *in* hand with the objectification of the human soul, whose inability to be listened to is the source of authoritarianism of all kinds and, more recently, the exploitation of people's time and vital energy in the service of an economic system that operates objectification.

The history of the objectification of people and nature dates back a long way. No matter how many movements – such as the ecological movement, organic farming, biophilic cities, and respect for animals – the slow movement proposes a life spent with more time, such as eating more calmly as opposed to *fast food*, or slow travel, to experience places as opposed to seeing many places in a short time but not experiencing any, and the minimalist movement or voluntary simplicity – are counteracting the objectification of oneself or nature, objectification is still the norm. The efforts of psychotherapies may not achieve a radical existential repositioning, as Hillman (1995a) highlights, but they do pave the way for sensitivity. Its scope is associated with the extent to which analysts have repositioned themselves, bearing in mind that no good psychotherapy creates models of how others should be. The existential repositioning that an analyst can inspire does not stem from giving advice, much less from setting a model, which would be nothing more than vanity. Rather, it stems from offering moments of self-perception that recognize the expressions of the soul, listening carefully to its subtle movements.

Yet the other half of the equation can still be overlooked: the de-objectification of nature and the planet as a living entity. How far is this an office issue? It would not be if the analysts had not yet sought to decontaminate themselves from the patriarchal-imperial-colonial-and-consumption lineage that transforms life into a product. Nor if the analyst is living in denial, like the average person, about the

climate tragedy that has been announced, not to mention the many ecocides and species that have become extinct precisely because of their objectification. It is this cultural complex of disconnection with nature that vows to lead us to extinction too. As we can see, its absence from the therapist's work portfolio will cost us dearly, as it is already costing the species that share this planet with us. It seems too much to ask of an analyst to look critically at the mentality in which we live, but no good analyst is trained otherwise, especially in the environmentally bleak times we are living in.

As Nazism exploded in Europe, many insightful analysts, artists, scientists, and thinkers fled to other continents to escape persecution. Many of those who stayed, for lack of critical reading, loyalty to those who would stay, or any other reason, paid with their lives for the choice they made. In the climate holocaust, there will be nowhere to run. There is no escaping it. However, it takes the same degree of perspicacity as those who saw the dangers of Nazism to do what you have to do as a citizen. The escape now is towards breaking out of denial, assuming citizen positions for the radical defense of the right to life, and not just our life, but the life of all species. The much-needed escape is also in the opposite direction of apathy and impotence, faced with the scale of the problem and the unpreparedness of our political and economic leaders to solve it in time. Inaction will cost us dearly.

So much for the need for Jungian ecopsychology and ecopsychotherapy. Fortunately, it already exists, pioneered by Jung himself. If he was not more explicit in his decision to treat relationships with nature as a symptom, I believe it was because this was not an urgent issue in his lifetime, even more so in the beautiful Swiss countryside in which he grew up and lived. However, it is worth recalling that, in many passages of his work, he was absolutely clear about the relationship between inner and outer nature. The core of Ecopsychology is Ecopsychology: Healing the Mind, Restoring the Earth. From this perspective, healing the individual implies healing the relationship with the Earth. The first step is to remove the planet from the category of thing and experience the radical sensitivity that allows us to see this celestial macro-organism as a living entity permeated with consciousness, the stage of a world that is full of consciousness. Hillman (2006) is absolutely right to evoke the idea of a new animism, for it resets our gaze. No longer that animism seen as the infancy of consciousness, as in 19th-century science, but one based on the science of animal behavior, plant behavior, the behavior of chemical elements, the behavior of atoms, and the behavior of the Planet, as described in the experiments that gave rise to the Gaia Theory (Lovelock, 2020), which portrays the Planet as a living organism. The ancient idea of *Unus Mundus* is a truth to be experienced intimately.

Final remarks

Living as active members of this living and conscious world evokes in us feelings of loyalty, belonging, and reciprocity, which are incompatible with how our societies and our economy behave. This is a revolution that must arise from a sensibility that is rescued and lived in its full depth. The image to inspire our systemic notion of health must be that of a planetary community centered on the quality of relationships, including the inevitable and necessary pains since suffering plays an essential role in both biotic and psychological renewal, of which the pains of childbirth are a universal symbol. Yet planet Earth itself is the core symbol of this major transition, the pains of which are now evident and others announced. The Earth is this biotic community in which each element fulfills its ecological function. It is a wonderful symbol of unity and interdependence, which ecologist David Suzuki (2009) has called Sacred Balance. The mentality that does not perceive such a sacredness, not viewing it in religious teachings or the teachings of science, is the greatest expression of alienation, arrogance, and ignorance, as well as being a criterion for excluding future political and economic leaders. I believe that this is one of the most significant conclusions that our heirs will reach when they look back and try to understand the choices made by their great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents if they are to have a future.

We of the present generation have no choice but to welcome planet Earth as our interlocutor and that of our patients. To listen to it as we listen to them. Let it tell us what it expects from us. Also, let it tell us what each species that still survives our presence expects from us, although it is proving to be destructive. Insofar as this planet is the great mother that brought us to life, it is also the mother of all the layers of our being. I believe that the self is its mirror and, even more so, its spokesperson.

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