On Marti Kheel’s *Nature Ethics* and Its Implications for a More Integrative Approach to Transpersonal Psychology

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**Introduction**

In *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (2008), ecofeminist Marti Kheel critically analyzes the contributions of four holistic environmental philosophers. Kheel argues that in basing their moral recognition of the value of other-than–human beings and the natural world on abstract constructs (e.g. species, ecosystems, or the transpersonal Self) these scholars have held masculinist orientations that neglect to adequately care for individual beings. This paper will specifically focus on Kheel’s criticisms of Warwick Fox’s (1995) *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* and concepts from the field of transpersonal psychology more generally. Drawing from feminism, animal advocacy, environmental ethics, and holistic philosophy, Kheel suggests an approach to an ecofeminist holist philosophy that “never transcends or denies our capacity for empathy and care, our most important human connection with the natural world” (p.251). Kheel emphasizes the importance of empathy and care for specific individual human and other-than–human beings, which entails enactment through concrete actions. In the following paragraphs, brief overviews of Fox’s transpersonal ecology and transpersonal psychology will first be presented. These will be followed by a summarization of Kheel’s criticisms, which will be followed by a discussion of these in the context of ongoing debates and dialogues between proponents of the deep ecology movement and ecofeminist and transpersonal scholars, including a call to address the ecological crisis.

**Fox’s Transpersonal Ecology**

In the prologue to *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (1995), Fox stated his hope the book will inspire in readers further interest in gaining an ecocentric (i.e. nature-centered) worldview and the lifestyles and political actions that might flow from such an orientation. Fox introduced the term transpersonal ecology as his own particular ecocentric approach.

In *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (1995), Fox presented a comprehensive overview of literature on the eco-philosophical movement referred to as deep ecology, and argued for its re-articulation as transpersonal ecology. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess originally conceptualized what he defined as a “deep ecology movement” in 1973. Naess (1973) coined the term deep ecology in response to the shallow ecology of environmentalists and others who were relating to environmental problems from the limited perspective of nature as resource for affluent individuals in developed countries. Naess introduced principles of a deep ecology movement that would more comprehensively and fundamentally reorient dominant worldviews associated with the ecological crisis.

A central component of Naess’s (1973) vision was a process of deep questioning through which individuals could develop an ecosophy based on their personal values as apprehended through intuition, spiritual, religious, philosophical, or scientific beliefs. Fox (1995) noted Naess’s own personal ecosophy was inspired by the philosophies of Gestalt psychology, Advaita Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism, and Spinoza. Further, Naess’s personal ecosophy centered on his conceptualization of Self-realization, which entailed naturally emergent psychospiritual processes that serve to increase identification with the world and its constituents.
and included a motivation to enact compassion for other beings and to recognize the inherent value of the natural world.

In *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (1995), Fox argued that Naess's personal concept of Self-realization is the only characteristic that differentiates the deep ecology movement from other environmental philosophies. Consequently, in conceiving transpersonal ecology Fox focused on Naess’s concept of Self-realization, with which he saw strong parallels in the conceptualizations of psychospiritual development in transpersonal psychology. Drawing from transpersonal psychology and Naess’s personal ecosophy Fox aspired to bring ecology to transpersonal psychology and to bring transpersonal psychology to environmental philosophy.

Fox (1995) criticized anthropocentrism and hierarchical conceptualizations of psychospiritual development within some transpersonal theories and stated his intention to extricate those influences from transpersonal ecology. Like Naess, Fox held that through natural processes of psychospiritual unfoldment, the individual may access a larger Self that transcends ordinary ego awareness. From this expanded state of awareness, identification, compassion, and concern for other entities (elemental as well as organismic) may arise. Fox defined three general forms of identification: personal, ontological, and cosmological. Personal identification consists of the sense someone or something is part of us, often ensuing from personal relationships or contacts. Fox contrasted personal identification from ontological and cosmological identification, defining the latter two as transpersonal. Fox defined ontological identification, as a profound sense of affirmation of existence, such that the fact—the utterly astonishing fact—that things are impresses itself upon some people in such a profound way that all that exists stands out as foreground from a background of nonexistence, voidness, or emptiness—a background from which this foreground arises moment by moment (p. 251).

According to Fox ontological identification can be experienced by most individuals momentarily from time to time. Some individuals, most often those who have rigorously practiced spiritual disciplines to train their consciousness, experience the state of ontological identification more regularly. Fox noted the experience of ontological identification is difficult to express with words.

Fox (1995) described cosmological identification as based on scientific insight or mythological or religious worldviews that convey a deeply felt sense we and all other entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality. Fox wrote that cosmological identification entailed having a lived sense of an overall scheme of things such that one comes to feel a sense of commonality with all other entities (whether one happens to encounter them personally or not) in much the same way as, for example, leaves on the same tree would feel a sense of commonality with each and every leaf if, say, we assumed that these leaves were all conscious and had a deep-seated realization that they all belonged to the same tree (pp. 257–258).

Fox differentiated ontological and cosmological from personal identification by defining the former two as transpersonal states of awareness and stated that ontological and cosmological identification are more important to transpersonal ecology. Fox further explained this view stating that personal identification inevitably leads one to identify most with those entities with which one is most involved….The problem with this is that, while extending love, care, and friendship to one’s nearest and dearest is laudable in and of itself, the other side of emphasizing a purely personal base for identification is that its practical upshot (my self first, my family and friends next, my cultural or ethnic grouping next, my species next, and so on) would seem to have far more to do with the cause of possessiveness, greed, exploitation, war, and ecological destruction than with the solution to those seemingly intractable problems. (p. 262)

As will be addressed later in this article, Fox’s emphasis on ontological and cosmological identification and de-emphasis on personal identification is one of Kheel’s primary criticisms of transpersonal ecology and of the field of transpersonal psychology in general.
Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology was first introduced by humanistic psychologist Anthony Sutich in 1969. In defining transpersonal psychology Sutich (1969) wrote:

The emerging Transpersonal Psychology ("fourth force") is concerned specifically with the empirical, scientific study of, and responsible implementation of the findings relevant to, becoming, individual and species-wide meta-needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experiences, B-values, ecstasy, mystical experience, awe, being, self actualization, essence, bliss, wonder, ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit, oneness, cosmic awareness, individual and species-wide synergy, maximal interpersonal encounter, sacralization of everyday life, transcendental phenomena, cosmic self-humor and playfulness; maximal sensory awareness, responsiveness and expression; and related concepts, experiences and activities. As a definition, this formulation is to be understood as subject to optional individual or group interpretations, either wholly or in part, with regard to the acceptance of its content as essentially naturalistic, theistic, supernaturalistic, or any other designated classification. (p. 16)

In a personal communication (2012) with transpersonal theorist and philosopher Mark A. Schroll, Schroll noted that when Sutich introduced the above definition, his use of the word "supernaturalistic" was critiqued by many transpersonal thinkers, including anthropologist and systems theorist Gregory Bateson, because it suggests the existence of a domain of experience that exists outside of material reality, which raises the question, among others questions, how do such domains interact?

Describing the cultural and intellectual significance of transpersonal psychology and how it differed from mainstream psychology, Tarnas (2002) wrote:

Compared with the positivism and reductionism that had long dominated the field, transpersonal psychology’s inclusion and validation of the spiritual dimension of human experience opened the modern psychological vision to a radically expanded universe of realities—Eastern and Western, ancient and contemporary, esoteric and mystical, shamanic and therapeutic, ordinary and non-ordinary, human and cosmic. Spirituality was now recognized as not only an important focus of psychological theory and research but an essential foundation of psychological health and healing. (p. viii)

Several transpersonal thinkers have emphasized (e.g. Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), along with conveying beyond, the Latin word trans, also meaning across, through, pervading, transforming, and by way of. However, the integration of transpersonal experience in daily personal life has historically received less attention in transpersonal psychology. The entire field has sometimes been conflated with the concept of transcendent states of consciousness, due to the prominence of the concept of transcendence as a definitional theme (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007). Nevertheless, while less visible, a comprehensive assessment of current definitions and works of transpersonal psychologists by Hartelius, et al. (2007) found a more integrative focus on the whole person has always been present in the field of transpersonal psychology.

Several transpersonal theorists have provided criticisms and ideas for revising the field of transpersonal psychology and bringing it into alignment with a more integrative perspective. For example, transpersonal psychologist Peggy Wright (1995, 1998) and transpersonal thinker Jorge A. Ferrer (2002) have pointed out although transpersonal psychology has been defined as inclusive and independent from any particular spiritual or philosophical worldview (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), mystical perennial philosophy has been an explicit and implicit influence in the field of transpersonal psychology. Mystical perennial philosophy is based on the premise there is experiential consensus about the ultimate nature of reality across diverse spiritual traditions and the truth of this realization is objective (Ferrer, 2002). Ferrer has explicated how this tie to the perennial philosophy in transpersonal psychology echoes objectivist epistemology and dogmatism. Offering a cautionary critique, Wright
has noted the perennial model draws from patriarchal cultures and as a consequence, the majority of theories influenced by it do not offer a female articulation of consciousness and spirituality.

In a critical review of Fox’s concept of transpersonal ecology, psychologist Homer Stavely and transpersonal pioneer Patrick McNamara (1992) explicited how Fox’s emphasis on the human processes of ontological and cosmological identification was a form of anthropocentrism and that Fox’s emphasis on integration of personal and transpersonal forms of identification (ontological and cosmological), which implies conscious effort to accomplish, is reliant upon human volition. Although they acknowledged that “clearly, it makes sense to focus on human agency if one is interested in preventing ecological disaster” (p. 208), they argued that

from a purely theoretical point of view it may not be wise to center a transpersonal psychology solely on human agency or events occurring within the individual. We wish to urge an alternative conception of a transpersonal self as that self that is shaped by the wild world, by the Earth, by wilderness, nature, etc., as opposed to that self shaped by human effort. (p. 208)

In alignment with Stavely and McNamara’s perception that conceptualizing the locus of spirituality as within the interior depths of the human individual may be limiting, Ferrer (2002) explicated how this may tend to lead the individual to derive all sense of meaning and spiritual realization through focusing on the self, which potentially fosters a sort of narcissism. However, unlike Stavely and McNamara, Ferrer did not suggest narrowing the conceived domain of the transpersonal. Instead, in response to these limitations and biases in the conceptualization of transpersonal psychology Ferrer proposed revising the concept of transpersonal as:

a way of thinking and living self, other, and world that can be diversely manifested not only in transpersonal states, but also in relationships, community, society, ethics, education, politics, philosophy, religion, cosmology, and almost any other area of human thinking, feeling, and action (p. 7).

In Ferrer’s model transpersonal phenomena involve the “creative participation of not only our minds, but also our hearts, bodies, souls, and most vital essence” (p. 115).

Kheel Criticisms of Fox’s Transpersonal Ecology

Kheel’s central criticism of Fox’s transpersonal ecology is his emphasis on ontological and cosmological identification and his de-emphasis of personal identification. Kheel makes several associations with this focus of Fox’s that lead her to see it as flawed in several ways. Kheel describes how emphasis on the universal and de-emphasis of the personal is an example of an oppressive conceptual framework. Ecofeminist Karen Warren (2000) defined oppressive conceptual frameworks as socially constructed lenses through which one views oneself and one’s world, which “functions to explain, maintain, and justify relationships of unjustified domination and subordination” (p. 46). Oppressive conceptual frameworks include value dualisms where one of two polarized categories has historically been designated as superior to the second, e.g. male/female, rational/emotional, culture/nature, and human/animal and in this case, universal/particular. Kheel notes feminists have identified the masculinist association of women with the particular realm of the body, nature, and mortality as a form of oppressive conceptual framework. Kheel holds that despite Fox’s claim the expanded realized Self does not imply superiority of humans over animals, the presumption of superiority underlies his philosophy, inherited from transpersonal psychology. Kheel implies transpersonal psychology is wholly based on Maslow’s (1975) conceptualization of transcendence. In summarizing his definition of transcendence Maslow stated:

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature and to the cosmos. (p. 3)

Although Maslow’s definition emphasizes relating to other species and nature, Maslow held humans reach their highest potential only when they transcend beyond the satisfaction of instinctive needs, which he associated with lesser aspects of existence that humans shared with the animal world. While
Kheel notes transpersonal psychology is more encompassing in its concept of the human than classical humanism (e.g., not only reasoning powers, but also emotional experiences, imagination, creativity, and spirituality were included in conceptualizing the unique traits of humans), it continues to reflect a presumed dualism between humans and animals. Kheel’s criticisms of transpersonal psychology do not take into account more integrative perspectives within the field of transpersonal psychology, such as those of Ferrer (2002) and Wright (1995, 1998). However, some of her criticisms may still apply and be useful for the field’s continued development.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2002) has explicated that historically, the capacities of human consciousness for abstract thought have been central in the relegation of other-than-humans as inferior and without rights, spirit, or feeling. Plumwood explained the on/off account of mind as consciousness inherited from Cartesian philosophy has led humans to be unable to adequately recognize other earth beings as communicative and narrative subjects with intentionality (i.e., viewpoints and capacities for well-being and desires). Plumwood suggested the concept of mind can take radically different forms, thus avoiding unnecessary ranking of beings and that other-than-human beings have capacities for mindfulness.

In alignment with Plumwood’s (2002) argument, Kheel argues the emphasis on processes of human consciousness in Fox’s (1995) constructs of cosmological and ontological identification and Self realization perpetuate anthropocentrism and that Fox repeatedly refers to letting other-than-human entities unfold, but provides no clue as to what that unfolding might entail for other-than-human beings. Fox has explained his focus on humans is appropriate given that he is addressing problems associated with human (mis)treatment in relationships with nature and that transpersonal ecology is intended to end anthropocentrism. Although Kheel agrees with the need to focus on addressing human behavior, she argues that emphasizing human subjectivity reinforces anthropocentrism if it obscures the subjective identity of other beings. Kheel holds that anthropocentrism is overcome by recognizing other creatures also have points of views that are just as valid as ours and that their experience of suffering is as real as ours.

Kheel also argues that in Fox’s (1995) ontological and cosmological identification, rather than relating to individual beings of nature, the abstract construction of nature is related to so that it functions as an instrument for the individual human’s consciousness development. Others are incorporated into the metaphysical Self that expands beyond ordinary consciousness states, rather than related to in a way that acknowledges and appreciates differences. Kheel points out the capacity to perceive and recognize the differences of the other is vitally important both for the ability to recognize and respond to the needs of others and to the psychological development of the perceiver.

Kheel suggests that if in order to relate to others an individual habitually takes a detached position, this could potentially be a form of avoidance of recognizing embodiment, feelings, or mortality. To illustrate the potential for blind sights with cosmological identification, Kheel points to examples of how cosmological identification failed to elicit caring by two individuals Naess referred to as exemplars of Self-realization, Spinoza and Ghandi. Kheel argues Spinoza was uncaring toward individual animals and that Ghandi was unkind toward his wife and children.

Kheel also objects to Fox’s (1995) reliance on ontological and cosmological identification, which she sees as forms of rational conceptual analysis and intellectual, metaphysical insights. Kheel sees the conceptualization of a Self that transcends relating to individual others as inheriting a rationalist preoccupation with the universal and its account of ethical life as oppositional to the particular. Kheel argues ethical conduct is fostered by the experience of moral emotions involving a synthesis of cognitive, ethical, and feeling aspects (e.g., love, care, respect, gratitude, empathy and friendship), all of which are relational/personal in nature.

Kheel points out that although Fox (1995) states experiential awareness is integral to the emergence of a sense of unity with other life he does not explicate how an awareness of unity might be attained in practice, particularly with reference to relating to individual beings. Nor does Fox clarify what factors motivating such transformations might be, or how cos-
mological awareness progresses to caring conduct. Kheel points out the explanations Fox does suggest vacillate between conversion experiences and gradual maturation, with little exploration of either process. Kheel likens Fox’s emphasis on cosmological identification as a sort of monotheism that leaves limited room for lesser gods. In summary, according to Kheel, although Fox (1995) expressed the importance of extricating anthropocentric and hierarchical elements from transpersonal models, his emphasis on the value of cosmological and ontological identifications reflects a hierarchy of mental over emotional, universal over personal, and human over animal—which she associates with anthropocentrism, androcentrism, and hierarchy.

Discussion of Kheel’s Criticisms of Fox’s Transpersonal Ecology

The criticisms that Kheel presents in *Nature Ethics* regarding Fox’s (1995) transpersonal ecology and transpersonal psychology are an example characteristic of some of the major debates and dialogues at the interface of transpersonal psychology, the deep ecology movement, and ecofeminism. Two primary topics of these debates are (a) conceptualization of the relationship between self and other beings/the natural world and (b) transcendent versus immanent approaches to spirituality. In the following paragraphs Kheel’s criticisms will be discussed in the context of these scholarly dialogues and in the context of addressing the relationship between human psychospirituality, other than human beings, and the natural world; how these conversations may inform the still developing field of transpersonal psychology; and the relevance of these dialogues to addressing the ecological crisis.

To clarify, debates regarding the relative value of transcendent versus immanent approaches to spirituality have centered primarily on degree of emphasis rather than discrete orientations toward immanence versus transcendence. The word transcendence has historically been associated with the incorporeal, ascetic, and monastic, and movement away from the material realm in order to unite with an eternal deity (Wilber, 1995). Immanence has been conceived as the recognition of spirit as manifested in the phenomena of physical reality as conveyed by the senses (Wilber, 1995). In *Nature Ethics* Kheel describes her own spirituality as having developed in response to her feeling that spiritual and mental states are meaningless unless accompanied by appropriate actions in the world. This thinking led her to see her choice of veganism as a spiritual practice. For the sake of this discussion Kheel’s description of her spirituality would be categorized as an immanence approach. Fox (1995), too, has emphasized the value of an immanence approach to spirituality.

In contrast, transpersonal thinker Ken Wilber (1995), who has greatly influenced the field of transpersonal psychology, has contended the views of ecofeminists, participants of the deep ecology movement/transpersonal ecology, environmentalists, and adherents of nature-based spirituality are flawed in that they exclusively focus on immanence and resultanty conflate physical nature that is perceived through the senses with spirit. According to Wilber (1995) these theorists equate spiritual reality with the truth claims of positivistic science and an objectivist perspective that does not recognize the interior, subjective aspects of experience or the higher perception of mysticism. In Wilber’s (1995) hierarchical conceptualization of psychospiritual development, both transcendence and immanence are included, but the individual must discover their identity with the One in order to accurately perceive and identify with nature. Wilber (1995) has asserted that the very highest level of consciousness is direct experience of nonduality, in which no division between the individual and God exists. This position suggests that unless one engages in specific contemplative and meditative practices and experience their fruits, psychospiritual development will be categorically inferior. Fox (1993), Ferrer (2002), and many other scholars have questioned the validity of so much focus on interior processes of the mind. Fox wrote:

> Does a focus on consciousness per se put us in touch with genuinely “higher”—more real or more evolved—states of being and norms of reality or is consciousness like a hall of mirrors in which we can “lose ourselves” in endless fascination but to no inherently “higher” end? This question is highly relevant to the question of whether we attempt to transcend our duly limited (and often painfully defen-
sive) egoic sense of self by “vertical” means (i.e. by attempting to experience “higher” states of being and forms of reality) or by “horizontal” means (i.e., by attempting to experience ourselves as intimately bound up with the world around us; as leaves, as it were, on a single evolutionary Tree of Life). (p. 241)

Despite Fox’s (1995) ostensible orientation toward immanence, Kheel is critical of his emphasis on transcendence. Kheel’s criticisms may potentially offer transpersonal theorists information for taking further the effort to recognize biases in transpersonal theories and constructs and potentially illuminate pathways for better grounding a transpersonal perspective that is centered on immanence. Naess (1990) elaborated that one’s spontaneous experience of nature has ontological adequacy such that there is no need for higher experiences of something supposedly more real and that at any level of Self realization, the individual egos remain separate, but the individual is not isolatable, as whatever exists is part of a gestalt. Kheel further clarifies her view by explaining that Naess’s (1990) explanations of his view have led her to feel his perspective is compatible with ecofeminist philosophy. Kheel notes through this explicit emphasis on relationality Naess (1990) avoids the problem of indistinguishability between self and other that Kheel and other ecofeminists have critiqued. Kheel also appreciates Naess’s emphasis on embracing a plurality of philosophical and spiritual perspectives. As described previously, Kheel sees flaws in Fox’s (1995) transpersonal ecology partly due to his narrow focus on ontological and cosmological identification and his lack of clarity regarding how such processes of consciousness are attained. Other scholars have noted Fox’s transpersonal ecology would have been more comprehensive and clearer if he had addressed certain important practices that may lead to states of consciousness that may foster a more ecocentric perspective. For example, Metzner (1991) and Schroll (2007) have discussed the importance of entheogenic experience, ritual, and shamanistic practices as pathways to such transformation and have noted Fox’s (1995) failure to include these topics in his presentation of transpersonal ecology. Stavely and McNamara (1991) have emphasized non-volitional, mystic, wilderness experiences, and also the role of community and ritual in fostering an ecocentric transpersonal orientation.

As noted, in critiquing Fox’s (1995) transpersonal ecology Stavely and McNamara (1992) noted the existence of transpersonal states that fall outside Fox’s descriptions of ontological and cosmological identification, particularly non-volitional processes. Stavely and McNamara wrote: “Fox’s reliance on processes of identification as forms of, or roads to, transpersonal experience, as opposed to emphasis on non-volitional aspects of ‘self’ prevents him from developing a truly transpersonal ecophilosophy” (p. 204). This author agrees with Stavely and McNamara’s general argument that Fox’s ontological and cosmological identifications are not comprehensive enough as concepts to capture the many varieties of transpersonal phenomena, including the role of non-volitional experiences. However, the volitional processes of integrating transcendent experiences may not only be of utmost importance to increasing one’s capacity to contribute to addressing the ecological crisis, but may also be conceived as integral to the full experience and expression of the transpersonal.

Wright (1995) noted the crucial need for greater inclusion of women’s experiences and values in developing transpersonal models of human development that do not eclipse the phenomenal world of the physical body, the senses, the Earth and all its beings due to an overemphasis on the detached spiritual self. Conversely, in countering arguments against the existence of a realm which transcends the material plane of existence, Zimmerman (2001) has noted a hidden domain, or an invisible generative matrix, has been referenced by virtually all of the spiritual and religious belief systems of the world. He has argued a totally physical or biological ontology as a basis for a spiritual path is not aligned with traditional paths of spiritual wisdom. DiZeraga (1996) has noted that while nature religions such as those of Native American Lakota, Navajo, and Crow and traditional Wiccans primarily focus upon appreciation of the sacredness of the world in which we live as perceived by the senses, they also see the world as permeated by Spirit and believe that a spirit world of teaching and healing powers exists, which can assist humans. Similarly, adherents of Neo-paganism em-
brace ontological realms which transcend the material plane, even though such realms are somehow related to the material plane, such that both the concreteness of matter and its mutability to spirit are recognized (Albanese, 1991).

Feminist, ecological activist, and spirituality scholar Charlene Spretnak (1994) has argued twentieth-century developments in quantum physics and systems theory have illuminated convergences between an ontology based on physicality and one based on spirituality. Although Spretnak has emphasized her belief in the sacredness of material existence, she has also noted that transcendent and personal approaches to relating might not be mutually exclusive processes. Spretnak has explicated how physical boundaries might not be absolute and “within the unfolding universe; a constitutive unity exists along with, not instead of, manifestations of particularity and subjectivity” (p. 429) through which seemingly separate entities are united. Spretnak delineated multiple sources of evidence that all interactions in the universe are instantaneously and inherently involved with each other. She has referred to scientific evidence such as nonlocal causality and systems theory research that suggests the Earth demonstrates complex capacities for self-organization and self-regulation. In providing further examples, Spretnak referred to non-linguistic and other types of knowledge that have been marginalized and devalued by a modern, objectivist orientation (such as different types of perception) such that while discontinuity may seem obvious at one level, it is absent at others. Spretnak described several types of phenomena in which radical nonduality has been perceived: female body–mind states that can be understood as body parables; experiences associated with immersion in wilderness; childhood experiences of the world as alive and unified; spontaneous unity experiences; indigenous perceptions of the Earth as alive and humans as embedded in the cosmos; and perceptual states associated with many Eastern and Western meditation practices. In alignment with Bateson and other scholars’ concerns about the limitations of the concept of “supernatural” as described previously in this paper, Spretnak has interpreted such experiences as “ultra natural” rather than supernatural, since they offer insight into the inner workings of a connected cosmos. She has also proposed, given the theoretical significance of relationality in ecofeminist philosophy, it is a potential locus for exploration of the meanings and implications of unified aspects of existence, despite reservations regarding the concept of transcendence and unity by many ecofeminists.

As an alternative to ontological and cosmological identification Kheel advocated the following alternative approaches to relating: (a) attentional processes in which another’s differences can be recognized without the need for seeking comforting commonalities; (b) co-feeling, which is engagingly participating in another’s feelings, rather than observing or judging them; and (c) practices which allow for understanding of what it is to be others and how they perceive. Some scholars have described relating in the context of transpersonal states of consciousness that might be somewhat more compatible with the concepts of both Kheel and Fox. For example, Buddhist deep ecology movement supporter and activist Joanna Macy (1990) suggested that processes of relinquishing the ego (e.g. ontological and cosmological identification) do not lead to distancing or to detaching from personal relationships, but rather heighten perception in ways which enhance, deepen, and particularize relationships. Surrendering to openness/emptiness liberates the person from anxiety, insecurity, and ego defenses produced by the illusion of separateness engendered by ego consciousness, which might also apply to ontological and cosmological identification and better clarify their interpersonal dimensions. Wright (1995) described the relational or connected self as consisting of permeable boundaries to allow the simultaneous experience of self and other and the capacity for regulation by the individual to either enhance or diminish one’s openness to the other. Wright’s perspective of the self is thus potentially inclusive of both Fox’s (1995) cosmological and ontological identification as well as ecofeminist and feminist relational models of the self that emphasize the importance of recognizing differences and the tension of the self-other boundary.

Emphasis on the significance of ethics to spirituality is a commonality shared by some ecofeminists, transpersonal thinkers, proponents of the deep ecology movement, and environmental ethicists. For example, Plumwood (2002) has written: “the label
‘spirituality’ should not allow suspension of critical judgment and responsibilities to consider the ethical and political content of systems of beliefs and practices” (p. 220). Spirituality scholar Ruffing (2001) and transpersonal thinker Ferrer (2002) have linked the problem of blindness to the needs and rights of other beings (human and other-than human) to limiting spiritual/mystical experience to the category of psychological phenomenon or altered state of consciousness, without reference to any larger spiritual/ethical system of belief.

Kheel has presented ethical behavior as an inherent responsiveness to caring for other-than-human beings. She writes, “A holist ecofeminist philosophy, as I conceive it, is not so much an ethic, as a consciousness or ethos. It is a ‘way of life’ or a mode of consciousness that invites us to be ‘responsible,’ not in the sense of conforming to obligations and rights, but in the literal sense of developing the ability for response” (p. 251). Countless individual beings are currently suffering due to the human actions that perpetuate the ecological crisis and this number will surely continue to grow. Kheel suggests moving beyond asking how to facilitate caring, to asking why we don’t care; thus reframing the problem in such a way as to normalize what she understands to be a natural capacity for caring that may somehow be obstructed by androcentrism. While this distinction opens a valuable area of discussion, the exigency of the current ecological crisis is such that it might not be pragmatic to focus on this alone. Kheel suggests exploration of why some don’t care might require uncovering unconscious processes associated with domination, aggression, and destructive behavior of such individuals. Kheel’s stance may be empowering in the sense it places the spotlight on abusers and hence could be a way to channel energy toward sociopolitical resistance. However, focusing primarily on the possibility of illuminating and healing unconscious processes of individuals who don’t care seems like a tenuous solution at best. Metzner (1999) has commented on the relative merits of conscious versus unconscious processes in the context of increasing ecological awareness, care, and responsiveness. Metzner (1999) recommended emphasizing ecological awareness associated with conscious processes such as ethical caring, ecological literacy, and moral considerations and noted the relative difficulty of comprehending and accessing unconscious processes. Attempting to address other people’s unconscious processes linked to abuse and domination is an even more difficult goal for several reasons, particularly because such individuals are likely less motivated to explore these issues.

Another issue that neither Fox (1995) nor Kheel addressed is the low correspondence between attitudes of caring and concern about the welfare of other-than humans and the natural environment and responsive action (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000; Finger, 1994; Kaplan, 2000; Schultz, 2000). Environmental ethicist Anna L. Peterson (2009) has noted this disjunction between values and practices has received remarkably little attention in Western philosophy. Peterson has pointed out most actions are grounded in values, clearly understood and deliberately professed, or implicit and unacknowledged/background values. Not recognizing this connection threatens the survival of all human and other-than humans. Peterson has emphasized the need for closer examination of background values and exploration of the relationship between values and practices. Peterson’s view corresponds with thoughts expressed by Metzner (1991), regarding Fox’s claim that ecocentric behavior flows organically when one attains Self-Realization and makes discussion of ethics unnecessary. Metzner stated he believes well thought out ethics and value systems are needed to examine the psychological processes involved in acquiring and changing worldviews and values. This writer sees parallels with Fox’s overemphasis on processes of identification as source for ethical behavior and Kheel’s emphasis on caring. While caring may be essential to its sustenance, engagement in ecological activism also requires high levels of both mental, emotional, and for some spiritual, engagement, and among other things, sociopolitical efficacy and competence at political strategizing.

Transpersonal theorist Donald Rothberg (2008) has explained how a participatory approach to spirituality may increase focus on the enactment of our ethics and values, reflecting “the contemporary (and ancient) intuition and intention that spirituality be integrative, that spiritual principles and practices might guide the practitioner in all the domains of his
or her life, both inner and outer, and in all aspects of his or her being, leading toward a sense of wholeness” (p. 351), inviting exploration of “what does it mean to develop a spiritually grounded ethical approach in terms of our larger ecological and economic systems?” (p. 364). Sustained engagement in addressing the ecological crisis likely requires complex integration and functioning of multiple levels of one’s being.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, a more integrative, pluralistic trajectory has been less visible and increasingly emerging in the field of transpersonal psychology. Does a more holistic approach to transpersonal psychology, such as the view presented by Ferrer (2002), address any of Kheel’s criticisms of Fox’s transpersonal ecology? Ferrer’s inclusion of the spiritual potential of the body can perhaps modify the concept of transcending biology through the powers of the mind/consciousness as requisite to psychospiritual development in some interpretations of transpersonal constructs (e.g. Maslow’s concept of transcendence of the instincts). Ferrer (2002, 2008) emphasizes respect for all forms of life and ecological conscientiousness, but in alignment with his pluralistic aims does not essentially embrace these. In addition, Ferrer (2008) has applauded the works of ecophenomenologist David Abram (1996). Abram has drawn from the works of phenomenological philosophers Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in shifting an ontological focus from the human mind and its powers of abstraction and transcendence to the sensing, experiencing body, collapsing the hierarchical, polarized categorization of human consciousness versus animal. Abram wrote Merleau-Ponty

opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand. Ultimately, to acknowledge life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of earth’s animals and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and intelligence. (p. 47)

Referring to comments of Aristotle, Abram continues,

[[Justifications for social exploitation draw their force from the prior hierarchicalization of the natural landscape, from that hierarchical ordering that locates “humans”, by virtue of our incorporeal intellect, above and apart from all other “merely corporeal,” entities. Such hierarchies are wrecked by any phenomenology that takes seriously our immediate sensory experience. For our senses disclose to us a wild-flowering proliferation of entities and elements, in which humans are thoroughly immersed. While this diversity of sensuous forms certainly displays some sort of reckless order, we find ourselves in the midst of, rather than on top of, this order. (pp. 46–47)

While Ferrer’s (2002, 2008) model is inclusive of Abram’s ecophenomenology, to this writer’s understanding it does not necessarily exclude spiritual perspectives that fail to recognize an equal status between other than human beings and humans. In addition, Ferrer’s (2002, 2008) participatory approach to spirituality seems to presume a special role for the human mind in enacting participatory spiritual events. Ferrer (2008) stated, “In a participatory cosmos, human multidimensional cognition creatively channels and modulates the self-disclosing of the mystery through the bringing forth of visionary worlds and spiritual realities” (p. 158). Ferrer is addressing human spirituality here and so an argument similar to Fox’s defense of his emphasis on processes of human consciousness in transpersonal ecology could be made (i.e., that it is appropriate to focus on humans when the purpose of the model is designed to aid human learning). However, as Kheel has pointed out, more explicit acknowledgement of the subjective validity of other-than-human beings might be necessary to ensure their full ethical validation and to escape the blinders of anthropocentrism. Elsewhere Ferrer (2008) stated participatory spirituality
does not require conscious awareness on the part of humans in enacting spiritual events. Ferrer wrote (2008), “I see spiritual knowing as a participatory action. Human beings are—whether they know it or not—always participating in the self-disclosure of the mystery out of which everything arises” (p. 137). Perhaps this inclusion of unconscious participation suggests the participatory spirituality model is more open to fuller recognition of consciousness states of other than humans than Fox’s transpersonal ecology and other transpersonal perspectives which rely on unique abilities of the human mind to define transpersonal experience.

Greater inclusion of ecofeminist holistic approaches to spirituality entailing participation of the whole being, the recognition of the equal status of the subjective and moral validity of other-than-human beings, non-hierarchical models of psychospirituality, and ecofeminist perspectives on relationship may encourage a more integrative trajectory of transpersonal psychology to come to fuller fruition. On the other hand, some ecofeminists such as Kheel may have unnecessarily reinforced schisms between ecofeminism and transpersonal ecology/psychology in their categorical discounting of transpersonal phenomena. The inspiration of transpersonal experiences may be highly significant for some in sustaining their motivation to more fully enact ethics and values by engaging in addressing the ecological crisis. A more pluralistic, integrative intersection of these fields might encourage communication and greater exploration of these topics, which are so important to addressing the ecological crisis and the suffering it does and will increasingly cause multitudes of individual human and other than human beings.

References


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