Depression and the natural world:
towards a critical ecology of psychological distress

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Researchers have struggled to explain the dramatic increase in diagnoses of 'depression' in the industrialised world. This paper argues that psychological distress is likely to arise within an ecological context that is becoming increasingly degraded, and in which the character of selfhood is being redefined to fit an industrialised context. In turn, these redefinitions of selfhood reduce our capacity to address ecological concerns. I argue that it is only possible to recognise the connections between human well-being and ecological health if we identify and challenge the dissociations and repressions on which the 'business as usual' of industrial society depends, and that a more embodied conception of the person is fundamental to this recovery of our wholeness. More specifically, I argue that our current reliance on cognition and our corresponding marginalisation of sensing and feeling, in addition to undermining human well-being, may be ecologically catastrophic.

Keywords: depression, ecology, nature, cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy, loss, individualism, denial, unrealistic optimism

Psychological health and the natural environment

Over the past half century or so, indices of psychological distress in the United States and Western Europe have risen markedly, with rates of depression and anxiety showing a particularly steep rise (Wickramaratne, Weissman, Leaf, and Holford, 1989; Cross-National Group, 1992; Hagnell, Lanke, Rorsman, and Öjesjö, 1982). While the diagnostic categories on which such findings are based will rightly be viewed with suspicion by critical psychologists, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that a continuing deterioration in psychological well-being has occurred despite a steady increase in material affluence. While researchers have often recognised the contributions of such factors as family breakdown, loss of communal links, and a more competitive occupational environment (Lane, 2000; Kasser, 2002) in bringing about this deterioration, the continuing destruction of the natural world has seldom been considered as possibly impacting human psychological well-being. The dearth of evidence in this area may reflect the prior assumptions of researchers about which factors to pay attention to as much as any lack of relation: as Stephen Kellert (2002, p118) remarks, one 'wonders if the relative absence of published material on this subject may be indicative of a society so estranged from its natural origins it has failed to recognise our species' basic dependence on nature as a condition of growth and development'. Similarly, John Schumaker (2001, p157) has suggested that modern society is 'characterised by a collective dissociative amnesia that involves a complete forgetting of the human-nature relationship'. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the reasons for this lack of attention and to explore the implications of what may be a largely unrecognised link between psychological health and the state of the natural world. I do so from a critical realist perspective which, while accepting that our interpretations and experience of natural phenomena are considerably influenced by cultural variations, insists on the reality of a natural order which exists independently of knowledge, language, and experience (Benton, 2001; Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, and Norrie, 1998). My approach also incorporates the focus on embodied expe-

rience which is emphasised in David Smail's (2005) 'social materialist' approach to psychological distress.

There are several possible reasons why any relation between psychological health and environmental degradation might go unnoticed. Not least, the marked specialisation and fragmentation that is characteristic of industrial life ensures that environmental issues are dealt with separately from psychological problems, drawing on separate disciplines, involving different administrative departments, and understood by means of separate theoretical frameworks. As Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1996, p xix) put it, 'the phenomenon of suffering as an experiential domain of everyday social life has been splintered off into measurable attributes. These attributes are then managed by bureaucratic institutions and expert cultures that reify the fragmentation while casting a veil of misrecognition over the whole'. Thus human fulfilment or distress are considered, if at all, simply as psychiatric or personal issues, both by a corporate realm which treats them as 'externalities' having little importance compared to the balance sheet, and by environmental researchers who often feel pressured to focus on less 'subjective' realms such as ecology or population dynamics. Consequently, the environmental debate tends to exclude those qualities of nature which cannot be expressed technically, tacitly assuming a rationally construable 'environment' inhabited by cognitively active but unfeeling individuals who relate to it simply in terms of its material 'affordances'. A strong case can be made that an effective critical psychology will need to adopt an ecological, naturalistic stance which can re-integrate these splintered components of the world.

Related to this problem is the difficulty of identifying and researching those pervasive background characteristics which, arguably, colour and infuse the entirety of our relation to the world, and so are difficult to link with any specific form of pathology. For example, growing up within industrial society is viewed as largely a process of *differentiation from* the world (Kidner, 2001; Searles, 1960) – a differentiation that is compounded by the shrinkage of the 'commons' and the corresponding expansion of

areas that are privately owned, commercially exploited, or built on. This differentiation, however, is usually taken as a normal, necessary part of growing up, and so is not recognised or researched as potentially problematic. Although it is not easy to investigate such pervasive influences on our well-being, we should not underestimate the child's need to grow up into a world that is taken for granted as basically good and healthy, conveying the sense that our role in the broad scheme of things is positive and constructive. These conditions exist in many indigenous societies, the natural environment simply being understood as 'home', and as good, nurturant, even parental. Growing up in these societies is a matter of growing *into* this world, learning from it, and locating one's life within natural processes and structures (Ingold, 2000; Rival, 1993). The knowledge that whatever our own personal problems, or the ineptitude, corruption, or blunders of whole societies, there is somewhere 'out there' a natural realm within which one can find refuge, renewal and certainty, is a fundamental source of ontological security. W. H. Auden (1966, 218), for example, after describing the corruption and decay that permeated the collapsing Roman Empire, ends the poem:

> Altogether elsewhere, vast
> Herds of reindeer move across
> Miles and miles of golden moss,
> Silently and very fast.

Today, however, both the 'miles and miles of golden moss' and the 'vast herds of reindeer' are under threat; and this deterioration in the natural context is likely to cast a long shadow over our identities and over the meaning of our lives. If we lose sight of our roots within the wild world, then these identities themselves become precarious; and we fall prey to glossy commercial substitutes. Such felt but unspoken losses therefore become a tacitly accepted part of the 'human condition', a dimly intuited 'fall' from which we spend our lives trying to recover, a guilt we can never quite grasp or expiate; and the origins of our emotional distress remain

obscure, slipping through the methodological net used by most research.

Despite the paucity of research exploring this issue, there is reason to believe that its significance has been underestimated. For example, Robert Ryan (2000) found in a study of people's relationships with an urban natural area that 'the loss of a special tree, changes in management, or increased development … can have a negative effect on people who have an attachment to natural areas', although the resulting 'loss or grief is not always verbally expressed'. The psychological impact of the destruction of a tree may even be compared to that of bereavement; as one Colorado farmer said, 'it's like losing a kid' (Sommer, 2003). These feelings of loss, because they do not correspond to a cognitively, legally, or economically recognised loss, are difficult to express in dominant forms of discourse. Conventionally, if we do not 'own' the tree, we cannot experience any 'loss' if it is cut down. Such losses, in other words, are already *built into* our economic system, and so seem to reflect 'the way the world is'. Felt relations, then, inhabit a twilight realm of the already half-lost and the cognitively abandoned, which makes their final loss more difficult to recognise or mourn; and one of the tasks of the critical psychologist is to drag this twilight realm back into consciousness so that we can reclaim our full identities as beings who are simultaneously social and natural.

How we dissociate the self and the world

This view that feelings and non-material relations are secondary and insubstantial qualities compared to material 'things' that can be 'owned' is invariably not shared by non-industrial peoples, who generally prioritise relation rather than the 'self-containedness' of isolated entities. For example, Tim Ingold (2001, p149), reviewing indigenous attitudes to the natural world, criticises the view that

> things exist, in the real world, independently of their relations. The relational model overturns this understanding. To exist, it asserts, is already to be positioned in a certain environment and committed to

the relationships this entails. Reality, then, is relational through and through. The relational field is no abstraction but the very ground from which things grow … Another word for this ground is *land*. … In a relational model … 'kinship is geography'.

From this perspective, there is no ontological discontinuity between self and land: self reaches out empathically over the land, which in turn is experienced as an extension of self. Consequently, as Edward Casey (1993, p35) says of the Dineh, 'to take away land is to take away life … the major cause of illness is not something "physical" or "psychological" in the usual bifurcated Cartesian senses of these words, but instead the loss of the landed place itself'. In other words, if we recognise the prior unity that lies beneath this Cartesian ontological split between an insubstantial subjectivity and an objectivity that is shorn of its relational and affective dimensions, we will reject the physicalist language of a solely material loss, recognising instead that the loss of land is *intrinsically* psychological as well as material. From this point of view, what we dispassionately describe as 'environmental damage' can be seen as *inherently* distressing and damaging to selfhood. Dominant industrialist discourses cannot articulate this, however, often preferring relativist interpretations of change as 'natural or inevitable', 'necessary for economic growth', and so on. Consequently, the nature and origins of our distress remain hidden from us, and it becomes 'free floating', unanchored to any recognisable 'cause'. This, as Freud (1963, p245) pointed out, is a recipe for 'depression', since 'melancholia is in some way related to an object loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious'.

The individualist and materialist emphases of our technological age have made us slow to recognise the centrality of relations of all kinds to the functioning of natural systems, including those in which we participate. Only during the past sixty years has there been a belated recognition that children derive their sense of emotional security largely from their dependent relationship with

caregivers, and that this relationship is itself 'nested' in a prior and on-going dependence of the caregiver on the Earth itself (Mann, 2005). More recently, physicians have begun to appreciate the importance of friends and kin for cardiovascular health. Only in the past two decades, however, have studies appeared demonstrating the link between contact with the natural world, on the one hand, and physical and emotional health, on the other. For example, Peter Kahn (1999) reviews numerous studies showing that humans prefer to look at natural rather than built landscapes, and at paintings depicting natural rather than abstract compositions; that natural landscapes promote a sense of physiological well-being; that prison inmates whose cells looked out onto nearby farmlands and forests needed less healthcare services than inmates whose cells looked out onto the prison yard; and that the presence of a picture of a natural scene including water reduced the blood pressure of presurgical patients by ten to fifteen points. Other studies have shown that contact with nature (as opposed to a visual representation of nature) has a range of psychological and physical benefits (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

Because the mechanisms underlying such findings remain mysterious, they have not entered the mainstream of thinking on human health. In many other cultures, the restorative quality of the natural world is taken as given, as part of the fabric of human-life-in-the-world (Brody, 2000; Nuttall, 1992; Nabhan, 1997). The anthropologist Robert Williamson (2002, pp189-190), for example, who has lived and worked extensively among the Inuit of northern Canada, who were often so badly damaged by forced acculturation in mission schools, tells how

The most restorative factor was the habitat. It has always been there, waiting for the soul-drained need of the hurt Inuit to move again into its ambit, returning to the places where the old souls were also waiting to be invoked. I remember an aeroplane landing on the ice near a hunting camp, returning some people from hospital. Among them was a young hunter, his hospital pallor contrasting with the bronze spring-time glow of the faces greeting

the new arrivals. He asked about the whereabouts and situation of his family. Sadly, the people told him his wife had died during his two-year absence in the sanatorium, and their two children separately sent to a missionary residential school.

He spoke earnestly to the owner of a dog-team that had come out to meet the plane, a kinsman's concern and understanding written on his features. And right there and then, straight from the aircraft onto the ice, he drove the borrowed team off into the surrounding country, promising to return in a few days. He drove that team non-stop, except for pauses to rest the dogs and hunt for them – for two days and two nights, and did not sleep until the third day. As we watched him heading over the ice and up the coast until he was out of sight, we understood.

Sometimes, conventional understandings do not merely ignore relations between well-being and ecological conditions, but actually invert them. For example, Jack Manno (2000, p182) points out that groups such as nomads and hunter-gatherers who make their own clothing, gather their own food, and so on will appear statistically as 'poor' because they have little measurable income. As they become assimilated into the industrial economy – as factory workers, for example – their 'income' will tend to increase; so that an apparent alleviation of poverty occurs as their lives actually become impoverished due to destruction of the natural environment and of the cultural traditions that are interwoven with it. The distress that results from this tends to be regarded as unconnected with these economic and environmental changes: as Manno notes (2000, p124), 'economic forces have become so thoroughly enmeshed in the activities of daily living that their injustices, particularly the destruction of the substance of community life, become invisible as purposeful acts of oppression and instead are experienced as personal problems'. What is happening here is that the intrinsic relation between well-being and participation in a healthy eco-cultural context is being wrenched apart, so that individual health is defined simply in terms of economic criteria, and the social, ecological, and psycho-

logical wreckage that results from this process is ignored. Manno (2000, p127) adds that those qualities that cannot be expressed in terms of economic criteria, such as 'local connection, conviviality, ecological attentiveness … are inherent human qualities, and their gradual impoverishment by the free reign of commoditization diminishes all human beings'. As one Inuit woman, Mary Adele, expresses it: 'On the land we are ourselves. In the settlement we are lost. That was the way they made our minds weak' (quoted by Brody, 2000, p277). Thus the destruction of important sources of well-being becomes invisible; and human welfare is redefined as flowing directly from the same industrial domain that in many ways undermines it. The destruction of the natural environment of communities has been shown to be strongly associated with reduced mental health (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good, and Kleinman, 1995) and findings that certain 'mental disorders' are rarer and have a better prognosis in non-industrial countries (Kleinman, 1988) supports the interpretation that advanced medical science may be a less than entirely adequate substitute for a lost relational ecology.

Reactions to loss

These findings starkly illuminate the way current models of the self – whether the individualistic, autonomous self of experimental psychology or the more diffuse postmodern self, constructed socially or by discourse – may diverge from people's lived experience; and to the extent that we accept such models, we will seriously misconstrue human needs. Human capacities such as spirituality, for example, are conventionally thought of either as *individual* qualities that are largely independent of the 'environment', or as constructed through culture-specific discourses such as religious dogmas. But especially in non-industrialised societies, which invariably view spirituality not in idealist terms but as an intrinsic quality of the world, many would agree with Roger Brooke's (1991, pp60-61) view that 'the self is not an entity but a capacity that emerges through the revelation of the world. The spirituality of the self, for example, is a capacity that emerges

through the world's revelation as a temple …'. In other words, we become spiritual beings by learning to recognise, value, and engage with what is *out there*, just as we become loving beings by recognising the loveliness of someone or something out there in the world, reaching out to them and so extending our subjectivity to include them. Conversely, if what is 'out there' is damaged, cheapened, and commercialised, then subjectivity recoils, taking refuge (emotionally and physically) within our islands of comfort, reinforcing narcissism and abandoning the world to further degradation. From this perspective, personal and 'environmental' problems are fundamentally the same problem; and a constricted form of selfhood inevitably complements a reduced landscape. An effective critical psychology should not accept this situation as part of the taken-for-granted context within which it operates and theorises, but should be prepared to envision healthier forms of selfhood even when these are inconsistent with current social and political conditions.

The form of selfhood suggested by Brooke is more often realised in non-industrial societies than in our own; and Brooke's statement, rather than being a description of contemporary selfhood, might be better understood as a sort of wishful thinking about the way we *could* be in a healthier world. From this perspective, both the industrialist self-as-autonomous-individual and the postmodern socially constructed self appear as immature, seed-like versions of the self, curiously cut off from their grounding in all those worldly structures that could contribute to our healthy development. If we take as given either of these undeveloped versions of selfhood, then we ignore the *prior*, historical reduction of the relational self, bracketing off those capacities that could integrate us within a healthy ecology. Consequently, we become oblivious to these relational capacities, since they were supposedly – according to both 'common sense' and most contemporary theory – never present in the first place. The fact that certain other societies embody relational views does not make them necessarily 'right', of course; but it does show that selfhood can vary in profound ways, and undermines the notion that our present

assumptions about selfhood are somehow inevitable. This being so, we may be justifiably sceptical about the understandings of 'normality' assumed by the most ecologically destructive society the world has known.

On this basis, we can distinguish between acute and chronic reactions to degradation of the environment. The acute reaction has been most often noted in 'undeveloped' areas of the world, and is characterised by an initial reaction of dismay and outrage when some subjectively significant aspect of the natural world is damaged or destroyed, followed by intense grieving, often accompanied by psychological deterioration and even suicide. This is in essence the grief reaction that follows bereavement, since the peoples concerned are quite clear about what has been lost; and it has been extensively documented in anthropological studies of peoples who have been driven off their land (Lassiter, 1987; Jilek, 1974; Jaimes, 1992).

This reaction will be less apparent in the industrialised nations, which possess social and ideological mechanisms designed to deflect and reinterpret emotional reactions to the destruction of nature. These mechanisms include the portrayal of destruction positively in terms of 'progress' or 'development', geographical separation from the landscape being destroyed, and the availability of a wide range of consumer goods and forms of 'entertainment' that distract us from and superficially compensate for the loss of less tangible and commodifiable necessities. Furthermore, contemporary socialisation and education emphasise a cognitive understanding of the world in terms of abstractions and 'resources', so that, as we noted above, it is *already* 'lost' to many of us in an emotional and cultural sense even before it is physically destroyed, and a chronic, suppressed sense of loss becomes an accepted part of our 'personality'. In Martin Seligman's (1990, p8) terms, 'an individualism without commitment to the commons produces depression and meaninglessness on a massive scale'. While we therefore avoid the acute grief reactions that occur among indigenous peoples, we pay a more subtle price which also includes the withering of our capacity to envision alternatives to

industrialism, and a resigned acceptance that the past, present, and future must necessarily be variations of the same 'reality'. Complementarily, the notion of a wild, unspoiled world is often presented as an unrealistic 'romantic fantasy', constructed by 'environmentalist discourses'. Wilderness, we are told, is a 'product of civilisation', and any yearning for a wild world is denigrated as 'nostalgia for a mythical golden age' – a term that suggests an immature desire for an unreal 'Edenic vision', implying that the industrialised world is the only possible one. 'Humanity' is therefore redefined as *industrial* humanity, and humans everywhere and at all times are portrayed as nascent capitalists (Hornborg, 2001, p90), eagerly awaiting the arrival of industrial technology so that they can take their place within the modern world – a view incorporated into the 'modernisation' theories of economic development adopted by organisations such as the World Bank. This constriction of historical awareness leads to what Kahn (1999) has referred to as 'environmental generational amnesia' – the repressive assumption that whatever environment we experience in childhood is healthy – and constitutes a reduction of our environmental and psychological imagination to the conditions which prevail during our individual lifespans.

This situation inevitably sows the seeds of discontent, anxiety, and confusion. If a wild nature, supposedly, never existed and can never exist in the future, then our grief is made to seem unreal and inexplicable. *This* is the world we are in, supposedly; no other world has ever existed, nor could it exist; and subjectivity should adjust itself to fit this present world. Swim with the tide of industrialist development: forget your childish dreams, your ancestral traditions, and the feelings that stir within you; and allow yourself to be defined by industrialism. Such views collude with those who have an interest in both our historical amnesia and our difficulties in imagining a non-corporate future. While we can mourn (and perhaps take action to correct) a loss that we recognise and can express, an unconscious loss is more likely to be diffused within channels such as consumerism and addictive behaviour, aided and abetted by the advertising industry. In Philip Cushman's (1990,

p600) words, the modern self 'yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost'. Such dubious 'solutions' are unlikely to work for long, however; in which case our sense of loss is likely to be understood as 'depression'. As Gananeth Obeyesekere (1985, p148) asks,

> is it possible that sorrowful affect may not be capable of transformation into public meanings under certain circumstances? … it is likely that in Western culture the affects of depression are not given cultural meaning and significance because of … rationalisation in Western society and the demystification of the world. In this situation, affects exist more or less in a free-floating manner, awaiting a different symbolic formulation: their conceptualisation as a disease, 'depression'.

As an example of the rift between 'public meanings' and 'sorrowful affect', consider the situation of the individual who at a conscious level absorbs the discourse of 'individual freedom' and 'consumer choice', but at a deeper level recognises that their choices reflect social pressures induced largely by the media and the advertising industry. Given the findings that a lack of control over one's life is associated with 'depression' and other psychosocial problems (Seligman, 1975; Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2005), this situation in which a conscious belief in one's freedom overlays an actual experience of *lack* of freedom is likely to lead to 'inexplicable' depressive feelings which may be interpreted as reflecting personal inadequacy. 'Depression', then, appears as irrational and unconnected with the external world; and the term amounts to a sort of epistemological siding into which we shunt those feelings that cannot be explained in terms of accepted 'realities'. Feeling and thinking have been ideologically separated, so that a resigned, 'rational', acceptance of the inevitability of 'business as usual' within a continuously degrading world coexists with 'free floating', inexplicable, feelings of 'depression' and 'anxiety'. As James Hillman and Michael Ventura (1993, pp11–12) argue, this ideological separation

converts my outrage – at the pollution or chaos or whatever my outrage is about – into rage and hostility. … Therapy introverts the emotions, calls fear 'anxiety'. You don't work psychologically on what that outrage is telling you about potholes, about trucks, … about burning up oil, about energy policies, nuclear waste, that homeless woman over there with the sores on her feet …

Feelings of outrage, reinterpreted psychologically as 'anxiety' or 'depression', are thereby invalidated as a basis for action, so that a failure to act, in another twist of this emotional vicious circle, further exacerbates feelings of powerlessness. As Catherine Lutz (1985, pp80, 88-89) points out:

there is a strong block against viewing [depression] as reasonable, as problem solving, or as rational. Like all emotions, depressive feelings tend to be seen as disruptions, or barriers to under-standing and rationality. … The person is split between 'emotional' responses to loss and 'thoughtful', rational, and controlled reactions to it. Our 'thoughts' critically judge our 'emotions'. This alienation of questions of value and feeling from questions of 'literal' meaning implies that loss will tend to be experienced in the West as an inner struggle between these two ethnotheoretically postulated aspects of the self.

What has happened, then, is that the conflict between the living world and industrialism has been concealed and mystified so that it re-emerges as a psychological 'inner struggle' within the human person. Humanity thus sits uncomfortably astride these two great systems; and much of the 'individual psychopathology' we suffer reflects the inconsistency between their demands. Theorists as diverse as Freud ('id' versus 'ego'), Carl Rogers ('incongruence' between the 'self concept' and 'experience'), and the object rela-tions school ('libidinal ego' versus the 'central ego') have recognised this inconsistency; but they have tended to uncriti-cally reproduce it as if it were an inevitable part of 'human nature'. Seemingly quite different approaches such as social construc-

tionism also manage to avoid recognising the conflict between industrialism and the natural order as a determinant of psychological distress, this time by defining selfhood as constructed by social or linguistic context, so that any innate qualities of human being which could conflict with the 'social' realm are defined out of existence. None of these approaches, then, acknowledge both the internal conflict *and* its source in an external schism; and so they implicitly accept some variant of the industrialist story about the triumph of 'rationality' and 'democracy' over 'irrational' forces. Consequently, they are unable to offer a complete account of psychological distress, or of how this distress might be alleviated. The task we face, then, is not simply to alleviate our individual discomforts, but also to recognise that these are derived from the wider ontological split that is tearing the world apart.

In summary, then, our embodied distress has difficulty in articulating itself except as an essentially inexplicable 'endogenous' form of psychopathology, a necessarily 'internal' problem unconnected with environmental conditions. In such ways are the experiential and ecological consequences of environmental degradation dissociated from one another, derailing the feedback loop that would otherwise motivate action to *prevent* this degradation. Thus the individual is reshaped to fit the industrialist landscape so that feeling and bodily awareness become mute and directionless, and we become the tame, needy 'consumers' envisaged by politicians and advertisers. The virtually inevitable distress that the 'normal' self experiences as a result of these constrictions is addressed by industrial society in ways that alienate us further from the sources of our distress and enmesh us more completely within this problematic style of selfhood. These ways include psychotherapy, alcohol, addictive consumerism, narcissistic withdrawal, and television sit-coms that, by encouraging us to laugh at and identify with the predicaments of the alienated, the overweight, the alcoholic, and the strife-ridden, convey the message that these problems 'are just part of life'. Only by studying the effects of industrialism across history and culture can we cultivate what Roy Bhaskar has referred to as an 'explanatory critique'

(Collier, 1994: Ch. 6) which illuminates the sources of otherwise inexplicable forms of subjective distress.

Living in a damaged world

'The destruction of the earth', says Robert Romanyshyn (1989, p24), 'is, for the incarnated human soul, whose entire history is inseparable from and has been shaped by its place on the earth, an unbearable reality'. One of the ways we make bearable this unbearable reality is by our disembodiment; that is, by distancing ourselves from our embodied being and the world it has evolved to inhabit, and by an idealist focus on intellectual and social 'realities', so that thought is used to control and discipline the body and the feelings, intuitions, and awarenesses that the body communicates. There is a vicious circle here, in which the idealist denial of feeling and the collapse of a degraded, emotionally abandoned nature mutually reinforce one another within a single pathological system.

This neo-Cartesian 'solution' may make us feel more comfortable in the short term, as we 'slip into a defensive mode designed to contain anxiety, pessimism, and hopelessness' (Schumaker, 2001, p157); but it sidesteps the underlying ecological problem by effectively switching off those faculties that might alert us, in effect restricting us to an exclusively *cognitive* awareness. A focus on thinking that excludes feeling, therefore, amounts to a bracketing off of reality. As Edward Sampson (1981, p735) argues, our culture's emphasis on cognition suggests 'people who are free to engage in internal mental activity – to plan, decide, wish, think, organise, reconcile, and transform conflicts and contradictions within their heads – and yet who remain relatively impotent or apparently unconcerned … about producing actual changes in their objective … world'.

At the individual level, this denial of reality reflects a delusional system that could in principle be understood in terms of Freud's (1979, p223) view of the psychotic who, having lost touch with reality, attempts to 'make good the loss of reality … by the creation of a new reality'. It is more than this, however: an entire

civilisation is losing touch with reality, not simply a few aberrant individuals. This civilisation is colonised by an ideological system that is increasingly governed by its own internal dynamics and attempts to deny our ultimate dependence on natural processes. Furthermore, as this system accelerates its work of transforming 'natural resources' into commodities, we are drawn more deeply into dependence on it as consumerism, the media, and a reliance on centralised power generation, embodying its values and rationality, increasingly appear to define both the character of reality and our own identities. At the same time, more ecologically attuned lifestyles are made to seem bizarre, deviant, and 'primitive'. While mental health is often defined in terms of being in touch with reality, what is generally taken for granted as 'reality' in this case is itself unreal, a façade that is out of touch with the more profound, half-lost reality that we evolved to inhabit. As the novelist J.G. Ballard (1995, p4) argues:

> In the past we have always assumed that the external world around us has represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination. These roles, it seems to me, have been reversed. The most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction – conversely, the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads.

I would argue, however, that it is not so much in our heads that the residues of reality are to be found – our intellects have been too deeply colonised for that – but rather in our *bodies*. Should these embodied residues express themselves too insistently, however, there are therapies available to help us quell the uncomfortable awarenesses that emerge. Cognitive-behavioural therapists, for example, are fond of quoting Epictetus's dictum that 'men are disturbed not by events, but by the views they take of them'. As one textbook explains the philosophy behind this type of therapy, 'the *idea* one has about the world is more impor-

tant than what is "real"' (Ivey, Ivey, and Simek-Downing, 1980, p303) The same authors (p325) say of 'Reality Therapy', to take another example, that 'people must act in a world that is imperfect and not built to their specification and must act positively in this world'. In other words, we must adapt to the world as we find it, not troubling ourselves with memories of what the world was like in the past, or visions of what it could be like in the future. In a similar vein, programmes have appeared (see, for example, Gilham and Reivich, 2004) designed to deal with the rising tide of psychological distress by training individuals to engage in thought patterns that are hopeful and optimistic. While it is not my intention to reject such therapies and programmes, we *also* need to ask what is depressing so many people in the first place, and ask whether psychological intervention adequately addresses their concerns.

Staring reality, and not least ecological reality, in the face can indeed be unbearable, and it is therefore unsurprising that many of us engage in mental gymnastics in order to avert the full psychological impact of the destruction of the natural world. As an example, consider the views of the late Julian Simon, an economist who for many years suffered from what he described as 'a deep depression', and who became famous as a scourge of 'doomsaying' environmentalists. Although Simon (1981, p9) claimed that the origins of his 'depression' 'had nothing to do with population growth or the world's predicament', he notes on the same page that

As I studied the economics of population and worked my way to the views I now hold – that population growth, along with the lengthening of human life, is a moral and material triumph, my outlook for myself, for my family, and for the future of humanity became increasingly more optimistic. Eventually I was able to pull myself out of my depression.

Applying the principles of cognitive therapy to resolve his own low mood, Simon became so enamoured with this approach that

he later wrote a book about it. Summarising the principles involved, he observed that 'everyone knows the old saw about seeing the glass half empty or half full. Even truer is that you can often choose which glass to look at, a glass which is full or one which is empty. Sadness and depression usually are optional' (1993, p93). We can, he continued, 'will [our] attention away from depressing thoughts', adding that 'we have some choice over what we pay attention to, just as we choose one television programme over another' (Simon, 1993, pp182, 168). But while this approach can be valid and useful in overcoming unrealistically negative interpretations, at least amongst the more articulate members of society, it is equally clear that it can be enormously misleading if it amounts to 'cherry picking' only those pieces of evidence that support one's own views and psychological needs. It is uncomfortably close to the attitude of those Austrian villagers who lived near to, but refused to acknowledge the presence of, extermination camps such as Mauthausen during the Holocaust, despite the smell of burning flesh and the occasional wisps of human hair that floated on the wind. As one woman put it, 'I am happy when I hear nothing and see nothing of it. As far as I am concerned, they aren't interned. That's it. Over. It does not interest me at all' (Cohen, 2001, p151). While such attitudes may permit one a degree of psychological comfort, they do so at the price of a deeper and more dangerous alienation from reality.

As Simon himself admits, 'a solid body of research in recent years suggests that depressives are *more accurate* in their assessments of the facts … than are non-depressives, who tend to have an optimistic bias' (Simon, 1993, p142). In fact, although this is still a hotly debated topic, the evidence supporting the 'depressive realism' hypothesis is now very substantial. There is also a burgeoning literature demonstrating that 'unrealistically optimistic beliefs about the future are held by normal individuals with respect to a wide variety of events' (Taylor and Brown, 1994). As Alloy, Albright, Abramson, and Dykman (1990, p72) summarise this evidence in a review, the 'findings of depressive realism and nondepressive optimistic distortions suggest that the primary

active ingredient in cognitive therapy may not be the enhance-
ment of realistic self-appraisal … but rather the training of
depressed clients to engage in the sort of optimistic biases and
illusions that nondepressives typically construct for themselves'.
Simon's own writings seem to illustrate exactly this problem,
predicting that

> Mining of the moon will begin in 1990. The material from 50
> million tons of moon rocks can be used to make solar-powered
> satellites that will provide all the earth's energy needs by 2000. …
> space is an ideal location for many types of manufacturing,
> including the making of electronics equipment. Space manufac-
> turing can begin in the 1980's, becoming a multi-billion dollar
> business in a few decades (Simon, 1981, p89).

Later, Simon (1994) speculated that there are enough resources to
last the human race for 'seven billion years'. Such ungrounded
fantasies can today be dismissed as wishful thinking; but the
popularity and influence of Simon's books suggest that there is a
hunger for this sort of good news, not merely among the public as
a whole but, more worryingly, among those in powerful political
positions. Our capacity to adjust our thinking according to our
preferences and to ignore whatever is inconsistent with these pref-
erences, when socially legitimised by media and politicians, can
lead to policies and actions which are near-delusional. The sepa-
ration between spheres such as mental health and environmental
policy, however, prevents us from recognising this loss of contact
with reality and its possible consequences. From the perspective
of psychological health, for example, putting a positive 'spin' on a
situation may be viewed simply as an attempt to avoid depressive
feelings; but when translated into environmental policy, such
'spin' may have disastrous consequences.

   Cognitive behavioural therapy undoubtedly has a useful role to
play in challenging unrealistically negative thoughts; but *realisti-
cally* negative thoughts require a quite different type of action.
The former represent a depressive alienation from the world

which can often be addressed through therapy; but the latter are the result of an *engagement with* the world that demands action *outside* the self. Viewed from this perspective cognitive therapy, like consumerism, the entertainment industry, and sport, is one weapon in industrial society's arsenal designed to fend off the awareness of our cultural, social, and environmental losses. As I have argued in this paper, the increasingly common diagnosis of 'depression' is not simply a matter of mental hygiene, but has its roots in the denial of those issues that are so threatening to our civilisation that they are seldom acknowledged or discussed. In a proportion of cases the melancholic may indeed have 'a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic' (Freud, 1963, p246); and as a civilisation, we would do well to listen to the truths hinted at by those feelings we tend to categorise as 'depressive' rather than attempting, through medication or therapy, to silence them.

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