Breaking the Shell: The Transformative Capacity of Transpersonal Ecology in the Context of Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract
This paper explores the concept of transpersonal ecology, its foundations, epistemological goals, critics, proponents, and its potential applications in the context of sustainable consumption. The production of beef within the global livestock industry and its connection to habitat destruction and species decline is used as a specific case study to present such an application. The capacity of transpersonal ecology to change perceptions, attitudes, and relationships at the personal and local level is emphasised, and the connection between global and local dynamics is highlighted. That human life is largely informed and defined by the extra-human, and is crucial to human understanding and self-discovery, is a point which this paper concludes on.

Keywords
Ecology — Resource Use — Social Science

There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention to the story.
– Linda Hogan, in Listening to the Land, 1995, p. 124

The concept of transpersonal ecology is useful because it reveals that our ‘sense of self’ has deep and far reaching implications in our relationship to the world, many of which have largely informed this relationship in the current state of human life. The degree of openness and inclusivity of our ‘sense of self’ has shaped the interrelationship between humans, other living beings, and the wider non-living world that humans inhabit and are a dynamic part of. Obstructing this ‘expansion of self’ is the view that the human should be held as separate and at the center of reality, above and apart from the remainder of the universe. The universe cannot be partitioned into such clean pieces however, and thus such a view is often harmful. This analysis will attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of transpersonal ecology as a lens through which to view human and more-than-human interrelationships in the context of ecological issues. ‘Production’ and consumption of livestock and its connection to habitat destruction and species decline will be used as a specific case to demonstrate the strength of transpersonal ecology as a psychosocial engine of change. Much has already been written regarding the effects of an exclusive self-centered and human-centred view: its link to ecological devastation and unsustainable ‘resource’ exploitation, its role in shaping our social, legal, and economic structures and ideologies, and its connection to the way we treat and view ‘Other’ beings and landscapes. The root psychological causes of these phenomenon may be a fruitful avenue of approach to fully explore the applicability of transpersonal ecology to ecological ethics. Aspects as fundamental as our direct moment-to-moment awareness of our connection to the world around us, our dualistic thinking, and our sense of ‘self’, are all extremely relevant in understanding how transpersonal ecology is a useful conceptual framework from which to view ecological issues such as sustainable consumption.

An exploration of the foundations of transpersonal ecology is necessary to understand its possible applications to the field of environmental ethics. The concept of transpersonal ecology emerged within transpersonal psychology, a field that attempts to study transpersonal experiences “in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Transpersonal ecology was first formally espoused by Warwick Fox (1990), who was interested in the idea put forth by deep ecologists that eco-philosophical problems regarding instrumental vs. intrinsic value could be explored in terms of psychology rather than axiology – the philosophical field concerned with theories of value. Fox describes most human relationships to the more-than-human as being loosely characterized by the typified tripartite aspects of the self. The first is a desiring-impulsive aspect which is linked to unrestrained exploitation and expansion regardless of reality-based constraints (e.g. finite resources). The second is a normative-judgemental aspect which constructs moral codes, decrees what ought to be (to perform some actions and abstain from others), and is exemplified by moral evaluation of the more-than-human world in intrinsic value approaches. The
third aspect, Fox states, is the rationalizing-deciding aspect (the ‘I’) which takes reality-based constraints into account and attempts to balance between the desiring-impulsive and normative-judgemental aspects in an economic way (minimizing potential loss and maximizing potential gain). Fox links the rationalizing-deciding aspect to resource conservation approaches which are anthropocentric in that they view the more-than-human only in resource terms, yet still attempt to address weakly anthropocentric moral concerns of sustainability by restraining exploitation. Fox argues that while these three aspects have differing interests (the desiring-impulsive aspect seeking instant gratification, the rational-deciding aspect seeking prolonged and forward-thinking gratification, and the normative-judgemental seeking the satisfaction of ideals and moral standards), the point of reference of these interests (the self to which they all refer) is atomistic, confined to a small point centered on the individual. All three aspects proceed from this narrow self which is divided from the world which surrounds it. Alternatively, and in line with deep ecologists such as Arne Naess, Freya Mathews, Joanna Macy, Bill Devall, Michael Zimmerman, John Livingston, and Andrew McLaughlin, Fox proposes a “this-worldly realization of as expansive a sense of self as possible”: the realization of an ecological consciousness or awareness that is inclusive of more-than-human elements (Fox, 1990, p. 59). Fox asserts, in consensus with many deep ecologists, that such a realization results in harmonious relationships between the human and extra-human without the need for moral consideration or exhortation, “just as we need not morals to make us breathe” (Naess, 1987, p. 39). Both deep ecology and transpersonal ecology contend that solidarity with more-than-human systems by human beings will be spontaneous if humans come to identify with the universe of which they are one, and thus codification of rights or value in a theoretical sense is not necessary. The aim of transpersonal ecology is not ethical then, but epistemological; the realization of an ecological awareness/consciousness through inclusive identification with the world. As Fox states:

Identification should be taken to mean the experience not simply of a sense of similarity with an entity but of a sense of commonality.[...] What is being emphasized is the tremendously common experience that through the process of identification my sense of self (my experiential self) can expand to include the tree even though I and the tree remain physically separate (even here, however, the word separate must not be taken too literally because ecology tells us that my physical self and the tree are physically interlinked in all sorts of ways). (Fox, 1990, p. 81)

Simply stated, the psychological way we commune with the world around us has an immense capacity to shape our actions. If we come to understand that we are ‘nature’, and that the Earth is ‘within’ each of us, then we come to have a greater reverence for all life and the land to which it is rooted. Fox elaborates that there are three forms of identification: personal (arising through personal involvement and familiarity), ontological (identification with the moment), and cosmological (identification with the interconnected elements of the universe), and indicates that if personal identification is not integrated with ontological and cosmological identification (i.e. the transpersonal), it will be detrimental and partial. The interdependence and interrelatedness of life and living systems is a basis which transpersonal ecology draws heavily from and is founded upon. The application of ecology (the science of the networks between and among living and non-living components) to understanding how human beings exist dynamically and dependently interwoven with the world around us has informed much of deep ecology, in turn heavily influencing transpersonal ecology. Human beings could not, and would not, exist without the extra-human elements which allow our essential existence. The very cells of our bodies are synthesized from the atoms and molecules of ‘other’ organisms we metabolize.

Concrete aspects of this interrelationship can be seen in our daily life: the water which runs from our taps, the food and medicine we consume, the materials which make the products we buy and the structures we work and live in. All the aspects which form the life-blood of the human find their origin in the ‘nonhuman’. Thus the human and extra-human may seem distinct, but they are not separate; they form a diverse and interconnected unity, not a duality. Another fundamental premise which underpins transpersonal ecology is its rejection of moralism. The reason for this, as Fox states, is that “advocates of approaches that issue in moral ‘oughts’ necessarily emphasise a narrow, atomistic, or particle-like conception of self - whether they intend to do this or not” and that this limits the realization of the expansive field of “self” which is the epistemological aim of transpersonal ecology (Fox, 1990). Moral demands necessarily emphasise a limited sense of self because there must be a particular ‘I’ which moral demands are in reference to, and a particular ‘I’ which is subject to judgement. Codified morality is seen as superfluous if empathy and compassion are capable of forming the basis of human relationality to the more-than-human. If true, this is relevant in that it has practical implications in the ability to influence human action. Compassion and empathy have the potential to be much more powerful influences on human behaviour than conceptualization of moral codes because they are more direct, they speak directly to the heart of experience.

It is perhaps ironic then that one of the major criticisms of transpersonal ecology has been its abandonment of value theory and moral consideration as an ethical framework. Ralph Metzner (1991) has stated that transpersonal ecology fails to recognize that we need ethics and value systems in order to make choices and resolve conflicts pertaining to ecological issues, and that the psychological factors in gaining and changing values and worldviews need to be further explored not ignored. For example, Metzner argues that since an ex-
expanded sense of self is not universally experienced and cannot be morally prescribed, there is no path to resolve conflicting interests:

If I say I am identified with the forest, and I don’t want it cut down, and the lumber mill owner says the forest is his property, and he wants to cut it down, how does my self-realization help me resolve this conflict? And what about my identification with the men whose livelihood depends on cutting down the forest?” (Metzner, 1991, p. 147)

Transpersonal ecologists would state that this very equivocality that assists in resolving conflict because it encompasses both loggers and forest through incorporation into an outlook that is inclusive of both yet goes beyond each. There is no ‘I’ that wants the forest cut down or the loggers livelihoods to suffer, but rather a compassionate awareness of the inter-dependent nature of the logger, the forest, and the rest of the universe. The action that arises from such a perspective seeks to preserve balance and integrity and transform discordant relationships rather than “take sides”. Lasting solutions to complex problems will come from approaches which attempt to integrate and transform opposing forces at the root rather than subdue one over another. A further counter is that ethics and morality are no more universally shared than ‘self-realization’ and so no more likely to offer solutions. Would an exposition of ethics be likely to solve this conflict? Rather than imposing a perspective on the loggers as a moral imperative, transpersonal ecology states (epistemologically rather than imposing a perspective on the loggers as a moral imperative) that if the loggers ‘look deeply’ at the forest, their own bodies, and the shared links between them they will come to understand the fabric of which they and the forest are a part, regardless of any argument for or against logging the forest. To transpersonal ecologists this insight is inseparably linked to the capacity to change our behaviours and worldviews, and so should be the fundamental area of focus rather than ethics. As the deep ecologist George Sessions writes:

A logically air-tight formulation of a non-anthropocentric ecological metaphysics or an impeccably formulated ‘environmental ethics’ is not going to solve our problems, even if such things are possible [. . .] our problems seem to channel down ultimately to human psychology, or states of consciousness (Sessions, 1983, p. 4).

Even in a hypothetical scenario where we had codified such an infallible ethic our ability to accept it and put it into action both personally and socially would largely be determined by our direct experience; our moment-to-moment sense of interconnection and belonging to the world around us. We can only ever act in this present moment. Another important criticism made by Metzner is that self-identification necessarily “gives rise to an ‘other’, a ‘not-self’– which inevitably leads to dualisms, divisions, separations, conflicts, [and] boundaries” (Metzner, 1991, p. 147). This is a valid criticism and is echoed by Homer Stavely and Patrick McNamara who have asserted that Fox’s emphasis on the expansion of self as facilitated by human agency fails to acknowledge that:

The transpersonal self is not a creature of human agency. It is trans-human. [...] The non-humanized world is the active agency. [emphasis added] Nature is no longer the passive set of objects awaiting the human imprint. Rather, the crucial set of events in development of a transpersonal self depends on natural forces outside of volitional control of the subject. [...] The task is not so much to integrate personal and impartial forms of identification as to submit to the experience of those transpersonal energies we come equipped with at birth, to undergo a transformation which is out of our control. (Stavely & McNamara, 1992, p. 208).

This acknowledgement of extra-human agency is important. The emphasis should not be on willfully ‘constructing’ a broader sense of self – adding to what we think and identify as ourselves – but rather on the deconstruction of the psychological barriers of ‘self/other’ (or ‘subject/object’) and allowing the transpersonal self to be revealed without obstruction through the world’s interaction with our sphere of experience. In other words, the aim should be diminishment of the ego rather than its expansion. As Eihei Dogen writes: “To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and illuminate the self is awakening” (Tanahashi, 2011, p. 29). However, the willingness to be open and not to grasp and reject must first arise. Fox has stated that transpersonal ecologists’ consideration of the self follows that if one “empathically incorporates the fact that we and all other entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality, then one will (as opposed to should) naturally be inclined to care for the unfolding of the world in all its aspects” representing “a natural (i.e. spontaneous) unfolding of human potentialities” (Fox 1990, p. 93). If we take this as the defining feature of transpersonal ecologists, then there are a diverse range of people (poets, philosophers, and mystics) through time who could be said to have espoused the basic principles of transpersonal ecology. Fox (1990, p. 250) specifically references Zen Buddhism and there are clear similarities; as in the words of Sengcan: “To know this Reality directly is possible only through practicing non-duality. When you live this non-separation, all things manifest the One, and nothing is excluded” (Clarke, 1984, p. 5). However, there are similarities evident in many other spiritual traditions as well. The Sufi mystic Rumi writes: “You are not a single ‘you’. No, you are the sky and the deep sea. Your mighty ‘Thou,’ which is nine hundredfold, is the ocean, the drowning place of a hundred ‘thous’ within you” (Helminski, 2005, p 81). So writes the Kashmiri Shaivite Lalleshwari: “As long as I
failed to see my Self, I could not see the ocean even though I was drowning. When I held aloft the torch of ‘I-am-That’, I saw that I was the ocean itself” (Muktananda, 1981, p. 39). Likewise the Daoist Lāozǐ: “The self embodies distress. No self, no distress. Respect the world as your self; the world can be your lodging. Love the world as your self: the world can be your trust”, and the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart: “As far as you are nothing in yourself, insofar you are all things and unseparated from all things” (Addiss & Lombardo, 2007, p. 13; Walshe, 2009, p. 263). Here are just a few of many examples that are found in a diverse range of places and times. As Winona LaDuke attests regarding Indigenous teachings:

Teachings, ancient as the people who have lived on a land for five millennia, speak of a set of relationships to all that is around, predicated on respect, recognition of the interdependency of all beings, an understanding of humans’ absolute need to be reverent and to manage our behaviour, and an understanding that this relationship must be reaffirmed through lifeways and through acknowledgment of the sacred. (LaDuke, 2013, p. 85-86)

The fact that the aim of ‘self-realization’ is shared between transpersonal ecology and numerous other traditions is relevant because it attests to the extent to which their aim is shared. Advocates of transpersonal ecology do not necessarily need to impose it as an external framework, as roots of similar approaches which seek to deconstruct the self/other division can be found across nearly every human cultural space throughout history. This similarity is likely not coincidental: as Stavely and McNamara contend, the aim of transpersonal ecology results in “nothing less than a spiritual transformation of the individual” (1992, p. 206). This also has important implications. Transpersonal ecology as a recognition of the sacred is not a romanticization of ‘nature’ as ‘good’ or ‘noble’; an imposition of human values on the more-than-human. That is a mirror by which our own obscuring ego is reflected back at us. Nor is it reference to a transcendental reality beyond or above the phenomenal world. On the contrary, transpersonal ecology as a recognition of the sacred is a lived awareness of that which pervades yet extends outside the human, inherent in the inseparable yet diverse unity of reality such as it is. From within such a lived experience the ‘subject/object’ duality is rendered groundless. Arguably, it is the construction of a strict ‘self/other’ (or subject/object) duality which leads to the duality of ‘human/nonhuman’ (or ‘nature/culture’); the difference between the two being primarily in terms of the scale of their reference. The former exists in reference to the human organism, and the latter in reference to the broader assemblage of human organisms at the level of species or society – notably of which each subscribing human organism is a member. From within the direct experience of the transpersonal, the duality of ‘nature/culture’ is deconstructed just as the ‘subject/object’ duality is deconstructed. Nature-culture is revealed as one coherent unity when the interdependent flow between the previously compartmentalized designations is recognized. This may be a path by which to convene Bruno Latour’s proposed “Parliament of Things” (1993, p. 142-145) on a personal level, as a transpersonal ecology that recognizes the autonomy and the agency of the ‘object’ – and is in fact informed by it – enables a more realized representation of the ‘object’ in human life. We may come to have the more-than-human speak through us rather than simply speaking about it.

Transpersonal ecology is a useful framework as it highlights the psychological aspect of ecological issues, and the extent to which this can be an engine of change within human beings and the societies and cultures to which they are connected. Today Earth may already be in the throes of a sixth mass-extinction of species. Dubbed the Anthropocene extinction, there is a broad consensus among biologists and others in the scientific field that since the onset of the Holocene (“10,000 BCE) human activities have led to extinction rates that are far above (100-1000 times according to conservative estimates) the pre-Holocene background rate of extinction, and that up to 75% of all species could be lost in the next 500-10,000 years depending on the extent to which current rates of extinction continue (Barnosky et al., 2011; Ceballos et al., 2015). Human-related activities such as habitat alteration, introduction of species, population growth, pollution, overexploitation, and their interplay with anthropogenic climate change are predicted to create “a perfect storm” for species extinction moving into the next century if current trends continue (Wilson, 2010; Pievani, 2014).

Many of these activities are fundamentally linked to the ways in which we personally and collectively consume. Although there are many high impact commodities such as palm oil, cocoa, coffee, sugar, tea, and rubber, the demand for and consumption of beef in particular makes an excellent case study due to the sheer scale of its ecological footprint and the degree of its consumption in Canada. Lenzen et al. (2012) have argued that international trade chains can often result in extensive biodiversity loss geographically isolated from where a particular item is actually consumed, and have linked 30% of global species threats to international trade. For context, approximately 44% of the biodiversity footprint of net importers (e.g. USA, UK, Canada, Japan, and Germany) is comprised of the production impact of the products they import (Ibid). It is not surprising then that in ‘developing’ countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brazil (to name a few), 35% of recorded domestic species threats are linked to production for export; a proportion which is as high as 50–60% in Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, and Honduras. (Ibid) The main link between beef production and threats to species is habitat alteration, but indirect effects such as its link to climate change (the livestock industry accounts for 14.5% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions), aquatic dead zones, and conflict with native carnivores and herbivores are worth noting (Gerber et al., 2013; Diaz &
More directly, three-quarters of deforested land in the Amazon region is used for production of livestock and livestock feed, much of it beef sold on international markets and exported globally to North America and China (Nepstad et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2009). If current trends continue, in the next 35 years highly biodiverse tropical countries are expected to increase agricultural land use by 3,000,000 km² to meet increasing global demand for meat production (Röös et al., 2013). The potential impact of increased demand is evident when considering scale. The production of livestock and livestock feed is the largest form of anthropogenic land use covering approximately three-quarters of all agricultural land or approximately 33% of all ice-free land on Earth’s surface (Steinfeld et al., 2006). On average, 7.0 gigatons of plant biomass are used to produce 0.26 gigatons of meat, with one-third of the annual global cereal production being consumed through this process (Foley et al., 2011). Ruminants consume the majority of produced feedcrops (3,700,000,000 tons vs. 1,000,000,000 tons combined for both pigs and poultry), and there is a much greater carbon footprint per kilogram of beef produced (~60 kg CO₂ equivalent emissions per 1 kg beef) than pork or poultry (with ~5 kg and ~3 kg CO₂ equivalent per 1 kg produced respectively) (Herrero et al., 2013; Nijdam et al., 2012). In terms of consumption, the average Canadian per capita consumption of beef is 20.2 kg annually, the third greatest globally, falling behind only Australia and the United States at 22.9 and 26.5 kg respectively (Chemnitz & Becheva, 2014).

Connected to beef production are also issues of environmental injustice and inequality: food security in that use of crops as feedstock often competes with use by humans (growing crops purely for human consumption could feed an additional 4 billion people), and waste in that a third of all harvested food is wasted globally (a disheartening 40% is wasted at retail and consumer levels in industrialized countries) (Cassidy et al., 2013; Gustavsson et al., 2011). In this case study (and arguably many others) the potential application of transpersonal ecology is most evident at the level of consumers, although a case could be made of its application at the level of those producers who have the privilege to make choices determining features of production. There are few things that are as intimate of an indication of how we are interconnected to the world, and the extent to which we are aware of this connection, than the ways in which we consume. Ecocultural and reciprocal restoration speak of a simultaneous rejuvenation of nature and culture (Higgs, 2005), a call not to be passive consumers but to sustain the land which sustains us and restore those lifeways (languages, economies, and practices) which recognize this need (Kimmerer, 2011). This is intuitive to transpersonal ecology as it is an experience of the inseparable interconnection of these aspects (nature-culture) and a recognition that revitalization is not possible without a fundamental transformation on a personal level. Transpersonal ecology allows us to foster an awareness of how our actions at the local scale are connected to the wider world and have far reaching ramifications, as well as motivating a reconnection with the spaces we inhabit. We are made aware of the prior divisions we lived by which led us to treat the world as mute; those spiritual dangers “of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery” (Leopold, 1949, p. 6). In realizing the interconnection to the land in which we live and are a part of, we are more mindful of the ways we consume and the consequences our consumption has on the state of the Earth as well as the health of ourselves and our societies; a reminder that our bodies too are part of the Earth. For any response to ecological crises to be successful in the long term it must persist at the local level, in the hearts and minds of people. Policy changes and top-down management (when they occur) can only take us so far. It is not often that paradigms within institutions shift without a change first in the perceptions and attitudes of the people which compose them. Each of us has to wake up and take concrete action in our own lives: to support local or fair-trade sustainable farming practices or to buy cheaper monocultured imports, to keep what already works or get the latest device we want, to indulge in a sirloin steak or to try to eat less meat (or in such a way that we foster our connection to the Earth rather than close ourselves off to it). As the activist Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

“What shall I eat today” is a very deep question. [...] When we’re able to get out of the shell of our small self and see that we are interrelated with everyone and everything, we see that each of our acts affects the whole of humankind, the whole cosmos. [...] Mindful consumption brings about health and healing, for ourselves and our planet. (Hanh, 2008, p. 25-27)

It would be a deep betrayal of ourselves if, after realizing our inseparable interconnection to the world and its human and more-than-human forms, we chose to act in a way that disavowed this relationship. There is no more fundamental an application of the strength of transpersonal ecology than in enabling the personal transformations required to change the choices we make in our lives.

To conclude, it is clear that human life today is very divided; among the divisions we humans construct among ourselves, let alone the divisions we construct between humanity and the universe. One result is that many of us do not live in accord with the world but attempt to lord over it. There is mass deforestation for agricultural land, expansion of human settlements, and access to mineral resources. Pollution is created both in the extraction of resources and by their manufacture into near countless goods for our consumption; aimed often at satisfying desires and economic doctrines which are themselves often manufactured rather than a necessity for survival. To look, to wake up to the suffering we cause to the more-than-human world, is a recognition that our daily lives affect the condition of the Earth and is a direct challenge...
to our narrow sense of self. True compassion is not possible if we maintain that human needs come before the needs of the Earth, and long term human survival on this planet will also likely be impossible if we maintain such a view. In the complexities of human life today it is easy to forget what we are. We often feel separate and isolated from the world. A realized transpersonal ecology implores us first to stop, and then to ‘listen’ to the world’s response to our lives and actions. It is our very capacity to be fully alive which is stifled by a narrowness of self. Humans are not separate, set apart, and adrift alone in a sea of space. We are part of a multifarious unity. If we cease to see that the more-than-human is also ‘within’ us, and if we are deaf to those landscapes and beings which speak to our lives then we have lost something dear, and with that loss we cease to truly know ourselves.

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.


**References**


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