Article

Spiritual Ecology: On the Way to Ecological Existentialism

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Abstract: Spiritual ecology is closely related to inquiries into religion and ecology, religion and nature, and religious environmentalism. This article presents considerations of the unique possibilities afforded by the idea of spiritual ecology. On one hand, these possibilities include problematic tendencies in some strands of contemporary spirituality, including anti-intellectualism, a lack of sociopolitical engagement, and complicity in a sense of happiness that is captured by capitalist enclosures and consumerist desires. On the other hand, spiritual ecology promises to involve an existential commitment to solidarity with nonhumans, and it gestures toward ways of knowing and interacting that are more inclusive than what is typically conveyed by the term “religion.” Much work on spiritual ecology is broadly pluralistic, leaving open the question of how to discern the difference between better and worse forms of spiritual ecology. This article affirms that pluralism while also distinguishing between the anti-intellectual, individualistic, and capitalistic possibilities of spiritual ecology from varieties of spiritual ecology that are on the way to what can be described as ecological existentialism or coexistentialism.

Keywords: spirituality; existentialism; ecology; animism; pluralism; knowledge

1. Introduction

Spiritual ecology, broadly conceived, refers to ways that individuals and communities orient their thinking, feeling, and acting in response to the intersection of religions and spiritualities with ecology, nature, and environmentalism. There are other ways of referring to this topic. Some people talk about the intersection of religion and nature, as in the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture. One can just as easily speak of religion and ecology, as in the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. These terms are not mutually exclusive at all, yet they are not exactly synonymous either. In some ways spiritual ecology can be preferable. In Leslie Sponsel’s book, Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution, he lists three reasons why “spiritual ecology is considered preferable to other labels” (Sponsel 2012, p. xiii). Most simply, “spiritual ecology” is shorter than “religion and ecology/nature,” and it can be more convenient to say fewer words. In addition, spiritual ecology sounds like other schools of ecology: ecosystem ecology, community ecology, political ecology, historical ecology, and so forth. Finally, it seems to be a more comprehensive and inclusive category than religion, as the word “religion” is often associated with organized religion and not with non-traditional or informal expressions of religious life.

What are the unique possibilities afforded under the heading of spiritual ecology? There is something provocative and transformative associated with spirituality, calling to mind experiential and experimental ways of life. Its resonance vibrates in feelings of inspiration and esprit de corp, perhaps the sort of feelings that are called for today to empower people to meet the unprecedented challenges of the current moment. This is not to say that all spiritual ecology is beneficial to people or to the lifeforms and ecosystems of Earth. Spiritual ways of life could empower adaptive, peaceful, and just responses to the proliferating ecological emergencies pervading the planet, but they could also disempower them.
My concern in what follows is this: how to discern the difference between better and worse spiritual ecologies. On this topic, Sponsel stays quiet. The main aim of his book is to give an “intellectual history” of spiritual ecology, with the “secondary aim” of providing a “resource guide for spiritual ecology” (p. xix). It is “an eclectic, inclusive, and relativistic approach,” such that the “goal is to understand and appreciate” different perspectives on spiritual ecology, “and not to judge which one or ones are more valid, useful, or better” (p. xix). To be sure, the aim and approach of that book are entirely appropriate for surveying the varieties of spiritual ecology, including animistic and Indigenous perspectives, Buddhism and Christianity, spiritual environmentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, esoteric philosophers such as Rudolf Steiner, spiritual films such as Avatar, and festivals such as Burning Man, and much more. In its capacious inclusivity, Sponsel’s book is not unlike another book bearing the same title (with a different subtitle), *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*. Edited by author and Sufi teacher Llewelyn Vaughan-Lee (2013), this anthology includes chapters by a wide array of leading voices in spiritual ecology, such as Chief Oren Lyons, Thomas Berry, Thich Nhat Hanh, Winona LaDuke, Joanna Macy, Fr. Richard Rohr, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Brian Swimme, and several others.

There is no explicit attempt in either volume to sort out the details regarding the evaluation of better and worse expressions of spiritual ecology. Pluralistic surveys have their place, but questions remain. Are some spiritual ecologies more effective than others in accounting for scientific fields of ecology? What are the political commitments of spiritual ecology? Has spirituality been coopted by corporate interests and individualistic values? While spirituality does not have some of the baggage that comes with religion, it has its own baggage, and some forms of spirituality can be more valid, useful, or better.

What follows is an attempt to discover some factors by which it is possible to discern better from worse forms of spiritual ecology. This is not polemical, but heuristic, searching for ways to identify the lines along which spiritual ecology variously promotes or inhibits human and more-than-human flourishing. Furthermore, this does not take anything away from the works by Sponsel and Vaughan-Lee. Quite the opposite, it affirms and supplements their approaches. For instance, Sponsel and Vaughan-Lee embrace an eclectic inclusivity, which suggests that they prefer inclusive to exclusive versions of spiritual ecology. It is a necessary condition of inclusivity that it temper its inclusion of exclusivity, so it makes sense that distinguishing inclusivity from exclusivity would be a factor by which one might be able to discern a better from worse form of spiritual ecology. To put it simply and somewhat crudely, the worse forms are stupid, selfish, and unhappy, and the better forms resemble a discerning inclusivity that could be described in terms of an ecological existentialism or “coexistentialism” (Mickey 2016).

To be sure, the aim of the paper is not to be original, but to add scaffolding to the spiritual ecology proposed by people such as Leslie Sponsel, particularly by synthesizing multiple perspectives on ecological existentialisms, which provide ways for avoiding anti-intellectual (stupid), individualistic (selfish), and consumerist (unhappy) tendencies in spirituality. Scaffolding and synthesis are important contributions to research, notwithstanding consumerist preferences for the new and improved. Perhaps the novelty and innovation of original research can give way to more collaborative modes of knowledge production. Accordingly, my voice in this paper is mixed together indiscernibly with the voices of those scholars with whom I am thinking, not to mention the myriad more-than-human voices that shape my perspective.

### 2. Stupid, Selfish, Unhappy

If someone identifies themselves as spiritual, that is often a shortened form of “spiritual-but-not-religious.” David Webster (2012), a scholar of Buddhist studies, attacks what he sees as the most harmful tendencies that befall spiritual people. Webster’s overall thesis is that contemporary spirituality exhibits tendencies to make those who adhere to it stupid, selfish, and unhappy. It is important to clarify what is being said here, as these are obviously incendiary remarks, but not merely so. Webster is careful to say that he is talking about contemporary spirituality in general, a very loosely
defined movement that affirms the personal growth and meaning-making associated with the spiritual quest without all of the baggage involved with a commitment to any particular religious tradition. It typically involves finding your own unique path by mixing and matching parts of religious traditions that you feel particularly drawn to. There is often a proclivity for the secrets of esoteric traditions and the “new age” optimism of developmental–evolutionary models.

To be sure, there is much contrast and diversity in contemporary spirituality. It is not all the same, and it is not all stupid, selfish, and unhappy. Webster acknowledges that some people use the word “spiritual” or “spirituality” in ways that are associated with affirmative, intellectually engaged, life-enhancing modes of existence. A notable example along those lines is the French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot, who recovers the spirit of classical philosophy as a way of life. Philosophy is a matter of “spiritual exercises” (Hadot 1995, p. 81). Philosophy “is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. [ . . . ] It is a conversion” (p. 83). Moreover, Hadot recognizes that his use of the word “spiritual” is out of step with what it means in contemporary contexts (p. 81), for which the spiritual is usually opposed to the rational. Notwithstanding Hadot’s relatively rare sense of spirituality or understandings of spirit in theology (i.e., pneumatology), contemporary spirituality in general does indeed contribute to stupidity, selfishness, and unhappiness. Those three terms warrant some explanation, beginning with stupidity.

There is a buffet style of pluralism and syncretism that encourages adherents of contemporary spirituality to pick and choose what they want and do not want from each tradition, even picking things that would not seem to be readily compatible, such as Hindu meditations on the identity of the self (atman) with the absolute (brahman) and Buddhist meditations on the reality that there is no self (anattā). This apparent inclusivity harbors some stupidity, which is to say, anti-intellectualism, particularly insofar as it involves a preference for the direct experience over mediated experiences that involve tradition, reflection, or critical analysis. Debates between competing truth claims are not frequent occurrences among spiritual people, and when they occur they do not rely heavily on intellectual sources of evidence. They rely more on appeals to emotion, appeals to the authority of authentic experience, and ad hominem attacks against the opponent’s emotional and experiential state of being. Reasoning, researching, and studying are for academics and scholars, who are viewed with suspicion as spiritually immature or inauthentic, deluded by calculations and blinded by reason. Alternatively, those intellectual pursuits are for religious people, who are dogmatic, fanatical, or both, debating only to defend their authority. For spirituality, those intellectual problems are pseudo-problems best left alone. From this perspective, if there is a conflict between Hindu and Buddhist truth claims, I can still mix their practices as I see fit, as long as I can find a deeper truth in my experience, beneath those superficial differences.

The different surfaces of religions can be sloughed off like so much dead skin. Doctrinal, institutional, and social layers of religion are discarded, and one is left with a compromised, watered-down version of religion. In short, spirituality is “faith-lite” (Webster 2012, p. 17). Like Søren Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, religion makes heavy—perhaps even impossible—demands on practitioners, compelling adherents to adjust their thinking, feeling, and acting to attune with what has been revealed according to the tradition. Spirituality as faith-lite does not make such demands. Under the covers of personal freedom and choice, it smuggles attitudes of intellectual laziness and downright hostility to intellectual pursuits. To make matters worse, it also makes people selfish.

Whether they are religious or secular, social and political institutions can be sites of community building and organizing or disorganization and destruction. If spirituality is about a personally designed journey, it orients spiritual people in a way that tends to be less engaged in social and political activities. In short, it makes them selfish. It is not just that spirituality avoids politics grounded in religion in favor of secular politics. Some spiritual people do that, such as those involved with the Network of Spiritual Progressives, addressing spiritual motivations and values, while maintaining the secular prohibition against religion in the public sphere. However, the individualistic tendencies in
contemporary spirituality make it prone to bypassing politics altogether, avoiding politics grounded in religion as well as secular politics grounded in reason and representation. On a personally designed journey, the spiritual person can bypass any embeddedness in communities, traditions, and institutions. In that sense, contemporary spirituality is selfish, similar to an otherworldly individualism that disengages from the troubles of existing together in this world. “Spirituality cedes the world to the worldly” (p. 7).

Ironically, while critiquing consumerist materialism for desiring material possessions instead of spiritual realization, the main kind of community that spirituality tends to support is consumerist community. This kind of spirituality is complicit in capitalist modes of social and political organization. One could call it McSpirituality, or as Ronald Purser (2019) describes capitalist spirituality in light of the prominence of mindfulness practice, “McMindfulness.” Capitalism is buying into spirituality, and spiritual people are buying into capitalism. Adherents of contemporary spirituality are buying spiritual fulfillment, purchasing the spiritual books, attending expensive meditation retreats and workshops, patronizing spiritual teachers and life-coaches, and following like-minded spiritual people on social media platforms. This capitalist tone of spirituality can also be heard in the increasing prevalence of “spiritual consultants,” who bring spirituality into corporate contexts to help workers feel better about their jobs, and feeling better is basically a euphemism for psychologically placated, not feeling better in the sense of feeling respected and valued at an equitable, fair workplace (Crispin 2020). Spirituality sells happiness, but that happiness is not authentic, at least no more authentic than the happiness I am afforded when a buy a new car or buy a book criticizing capitalism.

Webster follows the existentialist approach to happiness, for which happiness can only be attained by resolutely facing one’s own finitude and mortality, including the ethical and political responsibilities that come with being finite and mortal together. “If Camus can imagine Sisyphus happy, we too can turn our shoulders to the boulder and get stuck into living” (Webster 2012, p. 71). Spirituality is not overwhelmed with fear and trembling in the face of existence. Instead, spirituality enjoins us to ignore the abyss and follow our bliss; ignore social responsibilities and focus on being in the moment; ignore hard intellectual questions and stay with easy answers about oneness, immortality, and positive thinking. When happiness comes from bypassing the exigencies of existence, you no longer have to worry about the countless human and nonhuman others suffering outside of your personal bubble. You do not have to worry about your complicity in the system that is propagating their suffering. Effectively privatized, spiritual happiness becomes the name for a rather unjust and miserable way to live, a synonym for a destructive delusion.

Although Webster promotes existentialist commitment as a viable alternative to being spiritual-but-not-religious, his existentialism sounds too humanistic or anthropocentric to address the more-than-human concerns of spiritual ecology. To his credit, he distances his position from humanism in the concluding two paragraphs of the book, but the distance is not very far. He only distances himself from the British Humanist Association’s version of humanism, but he still fails to account for the ecological embeddedness of humans, and he reduces religious projects to a human invention. Webster claims that, if we want or need rituals, “then we are as capable of inventing them without spirituality and religion as we have been when we invented them as part of religious traditions” (p. 75). Who is this rather capable “we”? It sounds like it uncritically presupposes humans as the inventors. “Outsourcing mental activities” can of course move us “further from our ability to choose, from our agency” (p. 40). However, there is a difference between outsourcing mental activities and recognizing the embodied and ecologically extended character of human agency, which traverses the agencies of plants and animals, forming multispecies networks of agency.

Webster’s humanism leads him to promote “being atheists today,” and with that commitment to atheistic humanism, he fails to give any serious account of the ontological significance of religious phenomena (p. 76). Maybe angels and deities do not exist, but how do they have the impacts and effects they do? People do not just believe in angels and divine revelations. What about people—religious, spiritual, or otherwise—who are having visions or encounters with some kind of transpersonal or
more-than-human events? Are we just going to chalk it up to hallucination? Imagination? If so, what is the ontological significance of a hallucination or of image? Humanism mostly avoids those ontological questions or outsources them to cognitive science. Affirming the existence of God, spirit, or some kind of numinous energy is not something to be dismissed, as if it is always and everywhere nothing but a facade for anti-intellectualism or death-denial.

Webster’s existential humanism is better at finding joy in taking up the struggle to exist, but it fails to affirm the nonhuman agencies at work in the struggles of existence. For Webster, “we [humans] are alone together; just people, with no spirits, angels, collective mind-force, gods or dead ancestors,” and the space of this aloneness is not meaninglessness but “an absence for us to fill ourselves with a world of value and meaning of our choosing” (p. 71). At the very least, one would think that Webster would at least acknowledge the genetic inheritances of dead ancestors. Webster is too certain about who “we” are. “We” are not just all the humans living today. A more scientifically informed account would suggest that meaning-making should be understood as a much more open-ended process, not located simply in the human, but distributed across the self-organizing dynamics evident throughout cosmological and biological evolution (Kauffman 1995). We are not simply humans. We are and we are not. We humans are entangled in multispecies networks emerging amidst the complex, self-organizing dynamics of the cosmos, and our personhood is not that of a homogeneous people but is radically multiple and heterogeneous. Subject positions refract along multifarious lines of difference, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, ethnicity, nationality, and so much more, always more. Furthermore, it could be the case that the category of “human” need to be applied exclusively or primarily to Homo sapiens. Perhaps human can be applied to everything, as Eduardo Vivieros de Castro observes in his account of Amerindian thought. “When everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing” (Vivieros de Castro 2014, p. 63). By rethinking the human as intimately intertwined with the more-than-human world, an existential perspective on spirituality could widen into an ecological existentialism.

3. Ecological Existentialism

An inclusive approach to spiritual ecology, such as that presented by Sponsel and Vaughan-Lee, would be right to critique stupid (anti-intellectual), selfish (individualistic), and unhappy (consumerist) spiritualities. To promote peace, justice, and adaptive human–Earth relations across multiple perspectives and multiple cultures, spiritual ecology requires the kind of intellectual and interpersonal work excluded from those spiritualities. Affirming the existential conditions of spiritual ways of life, an inclusive approach to spiritual ecology can be thought along two lines: ecology and knowledge. Ecologically oriented, its inclusivity implies attention to the interconnections between humans and the other inhabitants and habitats of Earth. Inclusivity with respect to knowledge means embracing and coordinating multiple ways of knowing along with uncertainty and unknowing. Furthermore, inclusive knowing also involves multiculturalism and interreligious commitments. To identify the contours of an inclusive approach to spiritual ecology in terms of ecological existentialism, I address these two lines of ecology and knowledge. Before turning to knowledge, it is helpful to give more attention to the ecological side of ecological existentialism.

The anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose proposes an “ecological existentialism,” for which the insights of feminist theory and the existential phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas serve as crucial sources, particularly insofar as both modes of thought simultaneously affirm a relationality or interconnectedness between things, while also affirming an irreducible, irremediable difference whereby things maintain their uniqueness (Rose 2011, p. 42). The main feminist theorists to which Rose refers are Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway, who share commitments to relationships that do not efface the differences with which humans are woven together with one another and with all of the elements of existence (pp. 15, 112).

This dual affirmation of intimate entanglement and irreducible difference resonates with the ecological philosopher Timothy Morton’s proposal for the development of “an ethical attitude
we might call ‘coexistentialism,’” which likewise draws on phenomenology and feminism, as he considers Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray to be two examples of “prominent recent theorists of ‘coexistentialism’” (Morton 2010, pp. 47, 144n96). “We need a term like ‘coexistentialism,’” as Morton puts it, “to describe what it feels like to be a swarming colony: we contain multitudes” (Morton 2014, p. 301). Thinking in the wake of Martin Heidegger’s existential philosophy, while also diverging from Heideggerian thought in critical ways, they move further away from existential solitude toward an affirmation of the vulnerability and intimacy of coexistence, which for Levinas, takes the form of a phenomenological description of ethical encounters with others, and for Irigaray, it takes the form of a feminist theory of sexual difference. While Levinas is relatively anthropocentric, (eco)feminists such as Plumwood, Haraway, and Irigaray bring the ecological dimension of coexistence to the forefront.

It is noteworthy that ecofeminism and phenomenology also figure prominently in Andy Fisher’s approach to ecopsychology, which he describes as an “ecological existentialism,” which for him means that “the ultimate concerns of life are worked out in the context of our membership within the community of all life” (Fisher 2002, p. 267n9). The perspicacity of phenomenological description along with the critical and constructive force of feminist theory provide ecological existentialism with ways of attending to the exigencies of real bodies, getting in touch with things in all of their messiness, from their finely textured details to their most astonishing and compelling adumbrations.

Regarding the spiritual context of ecological existentialism, it might be described best in terms of animism. To be sure, animism is far from an innocent term, with origins in anthropological discourses steeped in racism, colonialism, and cultural appropriation. Its resurgence through the work of Graham Harvey has helped establish a sense of animism that faces the disastrous legacies of anthropology while also affirming the usefulness of the word to describe a sense of the world found among Indigenous lifeways and some environmentalists, philosophers, and adherents of Paganism (Harvey 2005, 2014). It is a sense of the world for which personhood or soul (anima) is not the sole property of humans. Personhood is distributed across all beings—more or less—and not in any homogenized or calculable totality. Animism does not theorize any “all” in the way that panpsychism and pantheism do. A tree is different from a stone, which is different from a wolf or a mountain. “Animism is neither monist nor dualist, it is only just beginning when you get beyond counting one, two . . . At its best it is thoroughly, gloriously, unashamedly, rampant pluralist” (Harvey 2012, p. 3). This pluralism could be said to attribute interiority or subjectivity to things, but that kind of theoretical categorization is not exactly appropriate. Things do not have interiority, subjectivity, or personality. They are persons, human and nonhuman. “The world is full of persons (people if you prefer), but few of them are human” (p. 2).

Persons are unassimilable others. In the relationships of ecological existence, persons are unassimilable others in intimate contact with one another. They are “intimate alterities,” not entities with an added layer called interiority or meaning (p. 2). One of the ways that animists avoid extraneously adding layers of subjectivity or sense inside or on top of things is through ecopoetic performances that exceed the limits of academic tractates and manifestos. “Animism is better communicated in trickster tales, soulful songs, powerful poems, rousing rituals, and/or elemental etiquette than in manifestos” (p. 4). Such performances are about respecting persons, which is not to say that they are either descriptive or prescriptive. Those performances are ways of adoring the plurality of persons. They are not describing identities or prescribing norms for ethical action. Trickster tales disturb the identities and norms that efface the intimate alterities of persons. Animism is not descriptive or prescriptive. It is a way of attuning to irreducibly different modes of planetary coexistence. Accordingly, it is taken up in the ecological existentialism of Deborah Bird Rose.

In Rose’s ethnographic research of Aboriginal people in Australia, she elaborates on the ways of being in the world performed in Aboriginal experiences of “country”—the place, home, or ecological community in and as which persons relate with one another. Rose describes country using a term from Levinas, “nourishing terrain: Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imaged or represented, it is lived in and lived with. [. . . ] country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart’s ease” (Rose 1996, p. 7). Country is a person. You can speak to it, sing with it,
visit it, desire it, care for it, and so on. Country is a person full of persons: trees, humans, dingoes, rivers, kangaroos, and stones. Persons are never alone, not even humans. Persons are in multispecies kinship groups, and those kinship groups have ancestral lineages that originate in “Dreamings,” shapeshifting “creator beings” whose transformative tracks crisscross the country, showing signs of the events that led to the formation of kinship groups, such as the clan that includes kangaroo humans and kangaroo animals, or dingo humans and dingo animals (Rose 2011, p. 17). Related in a family or clan, relatives take care of one another. Dingoes regard humans, and humans regard their dingo kin.

By remembering the Dreaming through trickster tales, songs, rituals, and poems, humans attune to their kin and respond to their intimate alterities. Along those lines, this “way of being in the world is a form of animism,” specifically as animism is “defined in a new and excellent study by Graham Harvey,” which is to say, animism as a recognition that “the world is full of persons” (p. 18). Moreover, Rose (2013) also finds this animism in the ecofeminist philosophy of Val Plumwood, who affirms a complex sense of continuity and difference with human and Earth others. In his ethnography of the Runa people of Ecuador’s Upper Amazon, Eduardo Kohn describes a similar sense of animism as an attunement to continuity and difference.

Runa animism is pragmatically oriented. The challenge for the Runa, as people who engage intimately with the beings of the forest in order, in large part, to eat them, is to find ways to enter this vast ecology of selves to harness some of its plenty. This requires being attuned to the unexpected affinities we share with other selves while at the same time recognizing the differences that distinguish the many kinds of selves that people the forest. (Kohn 2013, p. 95)

Animistic kinship with intimate alterities opens up ethical responsibility to the swarm of coexistence, face-to-face with the challenges of multispecies living and dying. Studying Indigenous lifeways, Rose (2004) is particularly aware that decolonization must be included in this animistic sense of ethical responsibility. Without decolonization, spiritual ecology seems likely to propagate stupidity, selfishness, and unhappiness.

The spirituality of Rose’s multispecies ethnography intersects with Morton’s coexistentialism. For both of them, this ecologically updated from of existentialism is an ethical orientation of respect for the compelling alterity of other humans and nonhumans. For both of them, the ways of being in the world that they represent can be considered forms of animism, as Morton (2010, p. 110) puts it, “an upgraded form of animism,” one that is attuned to the unique challenges of our current ecological emergency. However, the term “animism” is tricky. It is important to keep in mind that this animism does not presuppose an opposition between life and death, animate and inanimate. While it is useful “to inject a little bit of animism into the discussion,” he considers the possibility that it would be preferable to use a term that neither reduces life to nonlife (mechanism) nor reduces nonlife to life (vitalism), perhaps a term such as “undead” (Morton 2013b, p. 101). This is a hauntingly strange animism, if it is animism at all.

To warn against mistaking this animism for a “belief system,” for a perspective that opposes the living and nonliving, or for an attempt to unlearn modernity and return to precolonial, premodern animism, Morton crosses out the term: “animism.” In the parlance of deconstruction, it is animism under erasure (animisme sous rature) (Morton 2013a, p. 172). Under erasure, it conveys different ways of attuning to the intimate alterities of beings. Along those lines, an atheist, Muslim, Christian, agnostic, and a Buddhist can all practice animism, similar to the Christian animism proposed by Mark Wallace (2019), for instance.

What Harvey calls intimate alterities are what Morton calls “strange strangers,” which connect in a complex network of interdependence—the “mesh” (Morton 2010, pp. 15, 28–50). To think ecologically is to attune with the exigencies of radical coexistence, responding to the interconnectedness of things and their strangely compelling singularity. The two-fold thought of the mesh and strange strangers parallels in some ways Rose’s characterization of ecological existentialism in terms of two shifts that define the current moment of planetary coexistence: “the shift into uncertainty and the shift into
connectivity” (Rose 2011, p. 42). The shift into connectivity is the shift into the mesh, the intimate intertwining of human beings with one another and with the myriad denizens of Earth. This shift has come about with the articulation of ecological and evolutionary facts of interconnectedness and also with processes of globalization, which have intensified connections between humans and nonhumans across the planet, for better and for worse.

4. Ecognosis

The more we humans experience this intensifying connectivity, the more apparent it is that what we are experiencing is profoundly uncertain—ambiguous, unpredictable, and dreadfully strange. Intensifying uncertainty can be found in scientific discoveries regarding the complex, non-linear, unpredictable (stochastic) dynamics of material and organic systems. More horrifying, this uncertainty radiates from the proliferation of unpredictable events occasioned by massively distributed entities (“hyperobjects”) such as global warming, capitalism, and the current mass extinction event (Morton 2013a, p. 1). Those are unbearably intimate alterities to which you and I are called to respond. Knowing how to respond is complicated. Too robust of a claim to knowledge distorts the irreducible strangeness of things, leading to certainties and fundamentalisms. If one has to choose between certain knowledge and a more agnostic approach, the latter seems preferable.

Such an approach to planetary ethics at the intersection of religion and ecology is proposed by Whitney Bauman. There is no omnipotent God or background nature in Bauman’s engagement with the intersection of religion and ecology. Bauman develops a planetary ethic through the articulation of “viable agnostic meaning-making practices” (Bauman 2014, p. 74). Avoiding anti-intellectualism on the one hand and religious and scientific claims to certainty on the other, Bauman proposes a viable, agnostic theological and epistemological method of exposing meaning-making practices to the edges of certainty and sense, edges where caring, loving relationships can emerge between humans and Earth’s myriad places. Agnosticism maintains suspenseful, open-ended engagements with contrasting ways of meaning-making, including ways of making meaning that involve deities and angels as well as ways that involve scientific instruments and experimentation, political participation and representation, artistic expression, as well as the values generated in the self-organizing dynamics that pervade the universe, from the most basic processes of matter-energy to the most complex organisms. Perhaps the best way to participate in coexistence after God and nature is to finally admit that we humans do not know the best way to participate in coexistence. We do not know as much as we often pretend to know, and we are not in control, at least not to the exaggerated extent to which humans with power and privilege at their disposal tend to think that they have control.

Bauman’s viable agnostic method is a good example of a coexistentialist approach to spiritual ecology. However, a coexistentialist might be too immersed in paradox and ambiguity to commit to agnosticism. How can we know that non-knowing is the preferred form of knowing? Bauman’s agnosticism is preferable to Webster’s atheism insofar as the former is more open to uncertainty, more ecologically oriented, and more hospitable to multiple meaning-making practices, it is not sufficiently ambiguous, weird, or paradoxical for an ecological coexistentialism. His agnosticism is too certain about the problems of certainty, knowing too much about the promise of unknowing. It is as if he is caught in a loop, avoiding claims of gnosis while also showing that gnosis is not always something to critique or avoid. The loop connecting knowing and unknowing resembles Morton’s notion of ecognosis. It is an interpretive way of knowing without knowing.

Ecognosis is like knowing, but more like letting be known. It is something like coexisting. It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn’t become less strange through acclimation. Ecognosis is like a knowing that knows itself. Knowing in a loop—a weird knowing. (Morton 2016, p. 5).

Being caught in a loop is what ecology is all about: complex systems of feedback loops. Some people attempt to escape the ecological loops, marking clear boundaries that would neatly
discern the difference between certainty and uncertainty, or human and nonhuman, or intimacy and alterity.

The attempt of humans to disengage from the ecological mesh is “the Severing” (Morton 2017, pp. 13–18). It produces the anthropocentric attitudes that began operating in civilization in the Neolithic development of agriculture and were subsequently exacerbated by the hierarchical and transcendent agendas of the so-called Axial Age religions, and then further exacerbated by the modern risk society and global capitalism. Tendencies toward anthropocentrism, androcentrism (patriarchy), racism, and otherworldly transcendence in religions are symptoms of the Severing. It separates humans from the more-than-human world, while also separating some humans (e.g., white and male) from other humans deemed to be closer to nature (e.g., women and people of color). The Severing causes ecological problems to which humans respond by trying to sever their connections to ecological problems, thus producing more ecological problems and more severing, and so on unto genocide and mass extinction.

Morton’s diagnosis of the Severing in religions after the Axial Age does not mean that Morton is against religious ways of being. He practices (and has written about) Buddhism; his notions of the mesh and strange stranger reflect Buddhist notions of the interdependence and emptiness of things. He is affirmative of “the VIP lounges of agricultural-age religions,” which is his way of referring to the esoteric practices and lineages that have maintained intimacy with nonhumans, while the dominant trends in religions succumb to anthropocentric tendencies (p. 26). He encourages us to talk like Yoda, speaking of “the Force”—an energy field not unlike the mesmerizing energy that Franz Anton Mesmer called “animal magnetism” (Morton 2018, p. 80). In other words, ecognosis sounds strange and spiritual. Ecognosis is about realizing one’s intimate intertwining with others by magnetizing and being magnetized, tuning in and being tuned. It is not unlike Tibetan Buddhists talking about how one is blown about by “the winds of karma,” winds that circulate in and around the patterns of action accumulated in one’s life (Morton 2013b, p. 179). It could also be thought of as an analogue of the west African notion of ashé, which is a Yoruba concept for the force or power inherent in all things, effecting change and bringing things into being, giving things their character. It is associated with “mystic coolness” (itutu), as Robert Farris Thompson (1984, p. 16) observes: Coolness, then, is part of character, and as people “become noble, fully realizing the spark of creative goodness” endowed by God, they “find the confidence to cope with all kinds of situations. This is ashé. This is character. This is mystic coolness. All one.”

With Morton drawing on Buddhism and esotericism, and Rose drawing on Indigenous traditions and the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, it is clear ecognostic perspectives build alliances across cultural and religious differences. Ecognosis is an open-ended, relational way of knowing, which keeps the door open for pluralistic interactions and inclusive collaboration. Ecognosis can foster a democratic politics of care for all beings folded into the mesh of ecological coexistence. It is in this sense that the term “coexistentialism” is deployed by Ella Myers, who adapts the term from Morton.

Coexistentialism refers to an ecological perspective that takes the interconnectedness of all worldly entities, humans and nonhumans, organic and inorganic matter, as its starting point. [. . . ] Coexistentialism locates human beings within this worldly “mesh” rather than above it. Such an ecological awareness challenges fantasies of mastery by reminding people of the extent to which they are affected by the doings of nonhumans. [. . . ] A coexistentialist perspective can and should guide the way we care for the world, as both home and in-between.” (Myers 2013, pp. 127, 130).

This sense of being at home and in-between can be extended from Myers’ ethical and political usage, so that it also includes multicultural, interreligious, and even transreligious ways of life. With ecognosis, one is at home in some culture(s), knowledge(s), and religion(s) more than others, yet one can also move beyond those bounds, finding common ground in and as coexistence. As Morton remarks, coexistence is a solidarity of humans with one another and with nonhumans. Ecognosis
feels like a hospitable atmosphere, as if coexistence is a strange solidarity with nonhumans, where “solidarity is the default affective environment of the top layers of Earth’s crust” (Morton 2017, p. 14). By attuning to that default affective environment, ecognosis facilitates the building of alliances across differences. Since it is always already there, this solidarity can be found at any time and place. Practices of spiritual ecology can be part of everyday life, observed in activities such as walking, breathing, gardening, cooking, and cleaning (Vaughan-Lee and Hart 2017).

A good example of being spiritually at home and in-between is given in the work of Erin Cline (2018), who connects Christian spirituality—specifically the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius—to other religions, particularly Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions. This is not a merely comparative analysis. Rather, it is oriented more primarily toward sharing—opening up possibilities for mutually enriching encounters across different concepts of spiritual exercise. Cline demonstrates a middle way between two extremes: on one hand, being only in-between, as exemplified in spiritual-but-not-religious attitudes unmoored from tradition, and on the other hand, being only at home, which is exemplified in fundamentalist refusals to recognize any validity or worth in a spiritual orientation other than one’s own.

Along with Cline, another important example comes from the thorough and thoughtful work of spiritual ecology by Sarah McFarland Taylor (2007) on the environmental activism of a group of nuns in the United States, Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology. The titular sisters are the nuns of a community-supported garden and center for ecological literacy, Genesis Farm, which was cofounded by Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis in 1980 and is located in Blairstown, New Jersey on the property belonging to her Dominican religious order (Taylor 2007, p. xi). Along with her work on the farm, MacGillis has spoken widely across the US as well as in Ireland to bring Catholic nuns into a deep appreciation of their place in the evolutionary story of the universe story, supporting the development of growing numbers of ecoliteracy centers and retreats.

Due to the historical connection between the Latinate word “spirit” (spiritus) and Christianity, it is quite common for Christians to speak of spirituality in a Christocentric fashion. This happens in one of two ways: either (1) failing to address other spiritualities or (2) considering other spiritualities to be malformed, incomplete, or even downright nihilistic. An example of the latter is when Jacob Sherman (2020), in an otherwise astute reading of the book of nature (liber naturae), criticizes Morton for being “nihilistic,” yet fails to acknowledge that any sense of “nothing” (nihil) in Morton is related to Morton’s spirituality, which involves Buddhism and western esotericism, not to mention Yoda. Taylor’s account of the green sisters focuses primarily on Christianity, but neither omits nor denigrates non-Christian spiritualities. Rather, she recognizes that the spiritual ecology of the green sisters has parallels in other traditions—as in the “engaged Buddhism” of some Buddhist monks—which come into various degrees of proximity to the Catholicism of the nuns (Taylor 2007, p. 125). Thus, while Taylor’s ethnographic attention to detail focuses primarily on Catholicism, her articulation of spiritual ecology makes room for “intergradations,” whereby traditions remain distinct while also connecting and overlapping, with gradations of Christianity transitioning into Buddhism or Indigenous lifeways transitioning into Christianity (pp. 76, 284).

The planetary scale of contemporary ecological problems requires multicultural coordination. Localism, separatism, and parochialism all avoid facing the stark reality of transboundary conflicts, as climate, water, air, fire, and wildlife inevitably cross the borders that keep bioregions ostensibly separate from one another. Moving between and across different traditions is imperative for coordinating collective responses to the global environmental crisis. The process theologian Roland Faber sums up this challenge in no uncertain terms: “the future of religion(s) will be transreligious, or there will be no future of humanity with religion, or of humanity as such” (Faber 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, this transreligious inclusivity reaches out toward religious as well as ecological and cosmic consciousness. “The transreligious reach must, therefore, be expanded in at least three directions: deeper into axial (and preaxial) resonances; inward into ecological awareness; and outward into interstellar consciousness” (p. 137). This capacious inclusivity opens up “a new transcendental horizon,
as humanity evolves such a universal, cosmic, ecological, connective, cosmopolitan consciousness” (Faber 2018, p. 437).

Faber imagines the transreligious future of humanity as a garden, “a profoundly ecological symbol, naming the deeper reality of the living together of humanity and all creatures in the Truth of their interrelatedness” (p. 1). “Religious peace,” according to Faber, “can only be transreligious, but, in this world of becoming, it must also unfold its implicit ecological complexity, captured by the eco-conscious image of the garden of all realities as their access to, and realization of, Reality” (p. 12). Faber’s garden of reality sounds a lot like the solidarity of ecological existentialism. In other words, solidarity in and among spiritual ecologies can only be coexistential, attuning to the intimate alterities that compose the ecological mesh and building alliances across human and nonhuman differences. In the last analysis, then, the eclectic inclusivity expressed in the works of spiritual ecology by Sponsel and Vaughan-Lee still stands, with the contours of that inclusivity coming into sharper relief. The varieties of spiritual ecology are at their worst when they become an excuse for avoiding the intellectual, interpersonal, and material work of tending to the garden of coexistence. The varieties of spiritual ecology are at their best when they empower people to tend this garden together carefully and consciously, in solidarity.

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