



# Four Ways to Meet the Ecological Challenge (after Matthew Fox): a Psychologist's Perspective

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*This article brings another view on human consciousness and world-views, this time from a psychological perspective, building not only on Matthew Fox but implicitly on Arthur Koestler who asked himself the same question as this article addresses. Matthew Fox is scheduled to speak at next year's Mystics and Scientists conference.*

**H**OW COME HUMAN beings are so clever, and at the same time, so stupid? This question is vital to the joint survival of ourselves and our planet as we know it. The question is intimately bound up with the way we relate to our environment as well as to ourselves. Psychology has insights to offer on both these, closely related, issues. What our world urgently needs at this critical juncture is not only analysis of what is wrong, but direction on how to go forward in a more healthy relationship, both with ourselves and with our environment. This article seeks to contribute to this analysis through sharing recent psychological understandings of how the human being functions, and for the forwards direction, I will revisit the four ways of Matthew Fox.

Matthew Fox is a prophetic figure who burst onto the British scene in the late 1980s, with his inspiring oratory, and his book *Original Blessing* (Fox 1983). He was at that time a Californian Dominican. His mission was to revive what he saw as the authentic tradition of Christianity, with its Judaic focus on God's relationship with the whole community; a focus on justice and a positive response to the natural world. He saw the tradition as having been hijacked by an obsession with individual piety, purity and sin. He saw ecological justice as springing naturally from this 'creation centred' Christianity. His argument that the ecological challenge is the central imperative of our time is more generally accepted today than when he first proclaimed his message. I will argue in the body of this article that Fox's central message of four ways to relate to the universe gives us a good answer to the ecological challenge, after considering some of his more recent ideas as they relate to psychology.

It is now generally recognised that we are in an ecological mess, by all but the most determined ostriches. I will return to the theme of what it is about the human being that has got us into this mess: our cleverness and our stupidity. Our cleverness is obvious in the way we have used our ability to control our environment to our own ends; to eliminate so

many uncertainties and discomforts from our daily life. Our stupidity is evident in the way that this activity has increasingly entailed devastating side effects for the planet on which we, and more importantly, our descendants depend for sustenance and survival. We love our children - so how come we are content to condemn them and their children to a ruined earth?

## What is the Matter with People?

Something is the matter with the way we relate to our planet, to our descendents and indeed, to ourselves and each other. The 2007 international conference to tackle climate change in Bali seems to illustrate this only too clearly. No-one can now dispute the facts, but can we get together and agree an immediate way forward, without feeling taken advantage of, without trying to score points? In the event, the only way to avert deadlock was to delay any real steps towards the declared goal.

The general irrationality of human behaviour has been noted from the time of Plato (and no doubt, before). Recent understanding of the way in which the brain is wired up enables us to get some sort of a handle on this. We fail to act in straightforward, rational ways, because our rational, logical, faculty is only one part of the complex apparatus that is a human being, and it is not necessarily the most important part, or the one that is in charge.

Matthew Fox has picked up this point in his most recent talks (such as the one he gave to the *Earth is Community* conference in London in September 2007. (*Earth is Community*: DVD set available - see reference list). Fox blames the 'reptilian brain' for our failures. I think he has grasped some of the argument, but only some - say he has taken hold of one leg of the crocodile. So, let us see how far we can get with the reptilian brain. This refers to the inner and lower regions of our brain that govern sleep and waking, rapid response to danger, emotions and arousal.

Parts of this apparatus do indeed have a lot to answer for. When the 'rapid response' department picks up a hint of

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threat, it wheels our bodies into action, flicking the series of switches that transforms the human being from a calm, relaxed state into a would be prize fighter or a quivering jelly. (See Ledoux 1993, for a neuropsychological analysis of this response.) The problem is that for most perceptions of threat in our current society, it is a close call which of these two responses is the more unmitigated disaster (though I would suggest the fighter). Worse, the threat memory serves up all the nastiest things that have ever happened throughout our lives to date and produces them at such moments as if they were current - as this particular mode of processing does not appreciate niceties like time. This is also a, usually counterproductive, effort to keep us safe, by reminding us of all possible dangers. This feature of the human mental apparatus is evident as we advance our understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and how to help people with it. It has long been understood that fear can overwhelm processing capacity, leading to the past being served up as if it were present in the form of flashbacks. We are now getting to a clearer understanding of how this malfunction depends on the existing of two types of memory processing, which can fail to coordinate in extreme conditions (Brewin 1989).

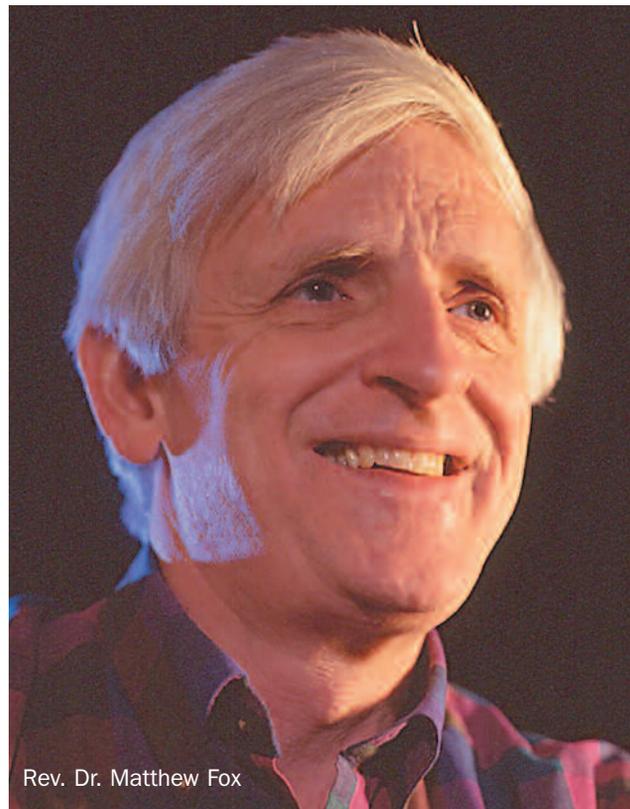
So, is the solution to try and transcend our animal inheritance and move into the higher realms of the neocortex? I would argue: no. It is the human capacity for logical thought and individual self consciousness that enables us to develop the technology that can wreck the planet, and then retreat into the cocoon of individuality to enjoy the fruits of our efforts, while the future burns and drowns. The neocortex has a lot to answer for as well. Besides, we can hardly be expected to ditch the entire brain.

### Pathways in the Brain

We need to understand the brain better; its limitations as well as its achievements. It is the gap between these two systems of processing described above – the so called ‘reptilian’ and the neocortex; the emotional and the logical; the fact that they developed separately; that they represent evolutionarily different parts of our history, and that they sometimes cooperate well and at other times they do not speak to each other. We need to understand this gap. Research into the interconnections within the brain over the last three decades give us a fairly clear picture of the way in which these two parts of our makeup are essentially distinct. I have elsewhere explained the cognitive science based model that can enable to understand this gap psychologically, for instance, in an earlier article in *Network* (Clarke 2000) and my chapter in *Ways of Knowing*, (Clarke 2005) and will say much more in *Madness, Mystery and the Survival of God* (Clarke 2008). Here I want to enlarge more on the implications of this twofold character of our mental apparatus.

The result of all this is that not one of us really knows who we are – because ‘who we are’ keeps changing. Our self conscious individuality is rooted in that verbally based, logical, ‘head’ bit. However, the other part, which connects with our bodies and our emotions, gives us everything that makes life feel worthwhile – the ‘heart’. This part does not make sense in a purely individual way. Our emotions are designed to manage relationship, and this part of ourselves is rooted in relationship. In a very real way, we are relationship. Not just the obvious relationships – all relationships. This is where our connection to ecology comes in. Right at the heart of our being.

Let me explain. Several schools of psychotherapy are based on the idea that we carry inside ourselves internalised



Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox

patterns of relating which play out in whatever situation we find ourselves. One of the founding mothers of psychoanalysis Melanie Klein identified this role of relationship. She called such internalised relationships ‘objects’ – leading to the somewhat obscure term: ‘object relations theory’. Freud’s concept of transference is another example of the same phenomenon. One of the therapies I use, Cognitive Analytic Therapy, brings these ideas together in the useful concept of internalised ‘Reciprocal Roles’ – repeating patterns of relating that originate in the past, but can be spotted and so revised in the present (see Ryle 1995 for more on this). The character of these patterns determines the character of the person. Someone who is contemptuous of everyone does not come across as very loveable. We make ourselves by the way we relate.

Another clue to the centrality of relationship to our being is the way that losses shake us to the foundations. People often arrive in the mental health hospital where I work because they have lost partners, parents or just jobs. The fabric of their being is disrupted by this and they need time and assistance to recover. Our relatedness is the foundation of that ‘heart’ part of our being. This is most obvious in the case of those close to us. An ecopsychological perspective recognises that this relatedness extends far beyond the obvious family and friends; our relationship with those other beings with whom we share the earth, the animals, and with the very ecosystem and the earth itself, is knitted into the fabric of our being. The character of that relationship lies at the heart of who we are, but paradoxically, we lose part of our individuality when we really embrace relationship. That is how we breathe and grow.

The tragedy is that we are currently locked into a relationship of reckless greed and exploitation with this wider reality. I would suggest that this damages us as much as it damages the planet. It causes deep pain that is hard to bear. Human beings are also adept at finding ways of blocking out pain; ways that cause even more damage – we call it addiction.

## The Role of Addiction

Matthew Fox really put his finger on this aspect when he identified the role and extent of addiction in our society in his book *Original Blessing* (Fox, 1983). Of course, addiction to alcohol, drugs, self harm, eating disorders and eating – all the obvious ones – are rife all around us. Fox added many of the seemingly harmless pastimes and lifestyle features of our society to the list of addictions; shopping, TV and cars, for instance. Of course, these are all features of the reckless consumption which is consuming the planet in its relentless conversion of the precious and limited resources of the earth into toxic waste. Interesting from the psychological point of view is what this culture of addiction does to us as human beings.

Addiction is about shutting off, limiting and narrowing down, as a defence against feeling; against really living. The heroin addict's life is reduced to obtaining the next fix, and all values of relationship and morality are jettisoned in that frantic quest. In this respect, spirituality is the opposite of addiction. Spirituality is about opening out; receptivity; allowing oneself to be vulnerable.

So, why are people so easily persuaded to retreat into this self limiting, sterile place (persuaded because this situation is clearly in the interests of global capital)? I return to the earlier argument that relationship, and therefore emotion, feels so dangerous precisely because it penetrates to the core of our being. As a clinical psychologist, working in an acute mental health hospital, I need a way of making sense of the instability of human beings, and their proneness to escape into addiction. All the main mental health problems or diagnoses can be understood in terms of the drive to escape from emotional pain and uncertainty; from insecurity and uncertainty about the self into the false certainty of symptoms. The consumerist, materialist addictions also give us that false sense of security. They secure the present at the cost of the future.

## The Four Ways to the Rescue

I have painted a pretty bleak picture. The genius of Matthew Fox's prophetic writing is that, as well as making no bones about what is wrong, which is the duty of any prophet, it gives us a vision and hope to take us forward. I am now going to revisit this vision as it is set out in his seminal book, *Original Blessing*. In this book, Fox was making the bold claim that Christianity had lost its way and betrayed its roots. He was appealing to an older tradition to bring it back on track. At the heart of his critique was the argument that idea of 'original sin' was a distortion of the true tradition, introduced by St. Augustine in the 4th Century CE. Fox appealed to the gospels, to the old testament prophets and mystical writers such as Meister Eckhardt and Hildegard of Bingen (among many others) to restore the original vision. According to this vision, creation was not flawed and sinful, but good and bountiful. Justice for the disadvantaged and marginalised was at the heart of morality, not the search for individual purity. In the light of the great challenge of our age, the peril of the planet, ecological justice needs to take pride of place.

Fox set out a programme for people to follow in order to get back to this original vision. He took the medieval mystics' idea of following specific paths of instruction; 'viae' – the Latin for ways. He came up with his Four Ways. The Via Positiva which mobilises the individual towards God through the wonder of creation; the painful encounter with the brokenness of creation, the Via Negativa follows naturally from this; accessing these depths opens humanity to its innate creativity, the Via Creativa which is a mark of our

godlike quality; awakening creativity in the individual is the catalyst to enable the person to engage with others in justice work to transform the planet, the *Via Transformativa*.

I will now use Fox's Four Ways to suggest a way out of the mess we humans have made of our relationship with the planet. To understand this psychologically, I will draw out the concept of our two distinct ways of processing, arising from the two completely different systems in our brains as described above. These distinct systems translate into distinct ways of being. I will emphasise relatedness; how relatedness invites us beyond the individual to a place of wonder and vulnerability.

When introducing the concept of addiction, I stressed that addiction is about closing down; shutting off. Fox's Four Ways are all about being open, being vulnerable. In terms of the two types of processing, it means leaving the apparent safety of our individuality and opening ourselves up in relatedness. The first way, the *Via Positiva*, is about the immediate response to the wonder of creation; its intricate beauty and commanding majesty. This is the response that calls the individual out of the sterile cocoon of their individuality to respond to the whole. Defensiveness and self interest fall away, and joy and generosity take their place.

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However, simply revelling in beauty and awe could turn into shallow pleasure seeking; say a long holiday in a destination only reachable by a planet destroying plane ride. It is the deep and sacrificial response of love that makes possible the rest of the journey through the four ways. This response opens the individual in vulnerability. Again, that closed off individuality is dissolved by entering into the divine sea of love.

Love opens the door to the *Via Negativa*; to the darkness of both suffering and letting go. This is the opposite of the darkness of the blocking out of the outside world, the escape into addiction. Love entails responsibility for the beloved. It opens the eyes and the heart to the damage that we are doing in our greed and stupidity. The courage to enter that darkness, and the strength to let go of the addictions that are ruining the planet, and preventing us from being truly ourselves is the mark of the *Via Negativa*. It also means the courage to risk losing our 'selves' in the sense of the self as identified with the verbal, logical, side of our being.

Making those sacrifices enables us to connect both with the wider reality beyond us and with ourselves. This conjunction puts us in touch with the wellspring of creativity that can flow between our being and the being of the universe. In the *Via Creativa*, the dance of the Four Ways takes us back into the individual in order to unlock the enormous potential that might otherwise remain shut up

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within. Taking the risk of losing our selves, we can indeed gain the whole world. Releasing this creativity opens the way for the fourth and the most powerful *Via* of all; the *Via Transformativa*; the one with a key to our current dilemma.

This is a model of flow; flow between the individual and the whole; flow of the individual into the whole and the whole into the individual. It is a hopeful model, that moves away from the restricted, addicted, mode of being that traps us in our limited individuality; that limits our vision to immediate comfort and interests, and so cuts us off from the wonder that catches us when we lift our eyes to the whole. It is also a vision that calls for real risk and real sacrifice. In the case of the *Via Transformativa*, it also calls for action.

Taking his cue from Thomas Berry's concept of *The Great Work* (Berry 1999), Fox dignifies this action with the idea that by working to further the good of creation, and against ecological destruction, we are participating in work of continuous creation; we are participating with God, the creator. As a Christian, Fox had a particular conceptualisation of God that is not universally acceptable. However, in line with the psychological model of the person that I have sketched in above, where a part of each one of us is composed of relationship, and flows in and out of the whole in that relationship, God can be seen as a name for the furthest and deepest reach of that web of relationship. Names and conceptualisation belong to the other part of our being; the part that pins things down. In my understanding, God is way beyond the grasp of that part. It is something we can only feel, as feeling is our way of 'knowing' relationship.

What matters here, is that by doing something quite humble, like keeping a household going; cleaning, caring and cooking wholesome food, operating in as authentic a way as possible in a twisted societal order, we are part of that continuous process of creation. Fox develops this theme further in another book of his; *The Reinvention of Work* (Fox 1994). Through our meeting with the pain of all beings in the *Via Negativa*, our creativity is awakened and we gain the courage to stand up for that authentic path. For some this might mean overt action, such as demonstrating or working for justice. For others it will be supporting organisations and others who are working in this direction. This is a collective and a communal redemption. Alone we are nothing.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *Network Review* is brave in recognising the challenge of the looming ecological catastrophe (for example, Palden Jenkins' article in the Spring 2008 issue – Jenkins 2008). I hope that this brief excursion into the psychological split written deep into our nature as humans, and the ways forward suggested by Matthew Fox will contribute to this engagement. The more we understand this split in our human processing capacity, the more we will be able to take account of it. I will cover this issue, and the whole area of the psychological understanding of spirituality in a book that O Books are bringing out in November – title:

*Madness, Mystery and the Survival of God.* (Clarke 2008). In meeting the ecological challenge it is essential that we hold fast to both sides of the split - to both head and heart. Our intellect and self consciousness can give us the means and the clear sightedness to find a way forward. Only the 'heart' can choose a sound direction. It is this spirit of balance which I see as essential to any success in the perilous enterprise of being human. It respects the latest findings of science, the fruits of that analytical neocortex part of our thinking apparatus, as well as honouring the older, 'heart' part of the human being. In engaging the 'heart' as well as the 'head' with the work of transformation, the dangerous vulnerability that this entails is not ignored. Fox advises that we should approach this encounter in a spirit of joy and love, not guilt and fear. These are enabling and opening emotions to take us forward together.

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- A different version of this article, appeared, under a different title in Greenspirit Journal. Spring 2008.

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