

# The Beauty of the Organic Oneness of Nature and Humanity: Environmental Psychology and the Bahá'í Writings

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## ABSTRACT

The organic and intrinsic interdependence of humanity and nature are explored through the lens of the field of environmental psychology and the Bahá'í writings. The internal conditions of the human—cognition, emotions, and values—are influenced and shaped by the natural environment. Vice-versa, the beauty and health of the natural world are influenced by the cognitions, emotions, and values of humans.

## Keywords

Environmental psychology; Beauty; Nature.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.”* (Bahá'u'lláh, 1975, p. 20)

We see in this aphorism of Bahá'u'lláh's the essential oneness of nature and humanity. All humanity has been created from the most basic aspect of Nature—the very foundation of all vegetable and animal life—the dust of the universe. Bahá'u'lláh calls upon all humanity to perform deeds and actions that signify oneness and detachment. In the context of this paper on the psychology of ecology this implies that our deeds must demonstrate our understanding that we are one with the earth, that humanity is co-extensive with Nature, and that we must detach ourselves from any desires that would harm Mother Nature.

There is an organic and intrinsic interdependence of humanity and nature. Humans are dependent upon nature for their physical existence—Nature provides the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the shelter that protects us. And the beauty and health of the natural world are dependent upon the thoughts, feelings, and values of humanity. Humanity now faces the choice of detaching from the materialism that is destroying our world (killing forests, killing rivers, lakes, and even the ocean, pollution through the creation of consumer goods, etc.) and caring for the air, water, and food sources of Nature; or of polluting and destroying them, jeopardizing the psychological health and physical existence of future generations of humanity.

## 2. COGNITION

Nature not only created our bodies and brains, but is essential and instrumental in the development of our minds. Bahá'u'llah (1975) has stated that God has “ordained for thy training every atom in existence” (p. 32). It is through the observation and study of the various configurations of the atoms that make up the planets and the stars (the mineral kingdom), the plant kingdom, and the animal kingdom that lead to human knowledge and the development of the mind. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (1966) has noted that the “mind comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete...” (p. 337). The very ability to think abstractly, one of the greatest gifts to humanity, and which sets us apart from the animal kingdom, is developed through our interaction with the concrete world of Nature. How grateful must we be to Nature for being our teacher!

Nature is the classroom in which we develop our cognition, but our cognitions also have a big influence on protecting or destroying that classroom, and changing it from something beautiful to something ugly. The manner in which we think of nature determines how we behave toward nature. As Kroger and Winter (2010) have described, those from Western industrial cultures typically do **not** think of nature “as a living, organic unity intimately tied to the activities of human beings” (p. 39). Rather, they think of nature as composed of inert, physical elements; they view nature as a machine without spirit. This leads to materialistic thought, and thus thinking of nature as an object to be exploited.

Kroger and Winter (2010) review the “Boomster” and “Doomster” ways of thinking about our environmental problems. The Boomster view is an optimistic cognition that science will find ways to solve all the environmental problems. This echoes Habermas’ (1971) view of “scientism,” in which people put an almost religious belief in the ability of science alone to solve all human problems. Unfortunately this thought can lead to behaviors that continue to harm the environment: “Don’t worry, we can rampantly mine minerals, and cut down whole forests, and pollute the air and water, because science will discover how to fix the problems we create.” On the other hand, the Doomster cognition focusses on the coming hell of environmental destruction; it’s the thought that we are doomed to destroy the earth and the industrialized societies’ way of life. This can lead to pessimism, and can cause youth to give up even trying to save the environment, or trying to have responsible environmental behavior, because they feel it is hopeless.

Our thoughts influence our behaviors. Nature creates the biological influences on ability to think, and our thoughts can either enhance the beauty and health of nature, or our thoughts can lead to behaviors that further degrade nature.

### 3. EMOTIONS

Experiencing the beauty of nature creates psychologically healthy emotions within us: wonderment, awe, stimulation, contentment, joy, relaxation, calm, peacefulness, recreation (“re” “creation”), etc. And our emotions impact the environment – if we have the emotions associated with greed, we are more likely to damage the environment by over-consumption and pollution in pursuit of material gain. If we have the emotion of compassion for all living beings, we intrinsically care for the health of the soil, plants, and animals.

As environmental psychologist Kaplan’s research (1995; 2000) has shown, the beauty of nature has a restorative effect upon us. When we experience the beauty of nature we become more reflective, can better ponder the complex issues of life, become happier, and, as Kaplan has shown, it can recharge our ability to think better and with more focused attention.

There is much precedence in the lives of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to recognize the importance of relishing the beauty of nature. For instance, in *The Dawn-Breakers* (Nabíl, 1932) it is recorded that when Mullá Husayn was seeking Bahá’u’lláh, at the request of the Báb, he encountered a Mullá Muhammad Mu’allim, who was from the same district of Núr as the Blessed Beauty. Among other questions that Mullá Husayn asked Mullá Muhammad about Bahá’u’lláh was, “How does He spend His time?,” and Mullá Muhammad replied, “He roams the woods and delights in the beauties of the countryside” (p. 106). It appears that Bahá’u’lláh especially loved the beauty of waterfalls: Balyuzi records, “When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá viewed Niagara, He recollected the much smaller waterfalls in Mázindarán, by the side of which, He said, Bahá’u’lláh loved to pitch His tent” (1971, p. 266).

Perhaps ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was remembering the presence of His Father near those Mázindaráni waterfalls when driving with Juliet Thompson and Laura Barney near Lake Geneva.

Thompson (1983) mentions in her diary,

*“Driving home, we came to the most spectacular waterfall, foaming down a black precipice. The Master peremptorily stopped the car and with a sort of excitement got out of it; then walked to the very edge of the precipice. After standing there for some time, His eyes fixed on that long, shining torrent, which seemed to be shaking off diamonds in a fury, He seated Himself on a rock hanging over the deep abyss. I can still see that Figure of quiet Power perilously poised above the precipice, that still, rapt Face delighting in some secret way in the beauty of the waterfall”* (p. 176).

The importance of the beauty of Nature cannot be overemphasized. As Harvard psychologist Nancy Etcoff (2000) has written, “Beauty is one of the ways life perpetuates itself, and love of beauty is deeply rooted in our biology” (p. 234). It appears that evolution has shaped us to be attracted to the beauty of mountain vistas, savannas, prairies, trees, vegetation, and bodies of water (Kaplan, 1987). The workshop of Nature has taught us to recognize this beauty, and the Manifestations of God have taught us that in beauty are the signs of God: “and the revelations of Thy matchless Beauty have at all times been imprinted upon the realities of all beings, visible and invisible” (Bahá’u’lláh, 1976, p. 63). “From the exalted source, and out of the essence of His favor and bounty He hath entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation” (Bahá’u’lláh, 1976, p. 262).

If we allow our hearts to be penetrated by the beauty of the signs of God in the world of nature, our emotions will move us to be devoted to caring for the natural environment. The majesty, sublimity, and beauty of Nature are the eliciting conditions for some of

the most wondrous emotions humans can feel, and move us to become noble beings. However, if we are veiled from those signs of beauty, we will become emotionally comfortable with the ugliness of polluted air, dead rivers, garbage and litter, and clear cut forests.

#### 4. VALUES

David Myers (2010) states, referring to the thoughts of Yale University Environmental Science Dean, James Speth, that we need a new consciousness, “a new worldview in which people see humanity as part of nature, see nature as having value that we must steward, value future generations as well as our own, appreciate humanity’s global interdependence, and define quality of life not just materialistically but also relationally and spiritually” (p. xiv).

Nature helps shape our values, and our values influence our behavior, which leads to humans shaping nature. As cited by Myers (2010) in the above paragraph, there are two major values that influence our relationship to the environment: materialism and spirituality. If we perceive nature in materialistic terms, we feel free to damage and exploit it; if we see Nature as essentially spiritual, we safeguard its health and beauty with all our will. As Shoghi Effendi (1965) has stated, materialism is a cancer:

*“...the crass materialism, which lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society. It is this same cancerous materialism, born originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent, contaminating the Asiatic peoples and nations, spreading its ominous tentacles to the borders of Africa, and now invading its very heart, which Bahá'u'lláh in unequivocal and emphatic language denounced in His Writings, comparing it to a devouring flame and regarding it as the chief factor in precipitating the dire ordeals and world-shaking crises that must necessarily involve the burning of cities and the spread of terror and consternation in the hearts of men.”* (pp. 124-125)

Environmental psychologists Susan Kroger and Deborah Winter (2010) have also emphasized how materialism is a major cause of environmental degradation: “Materialistic values are problematic because people who hold them have larger ecological footprints, that is, they consume more of the earth’s resources due to their lifestyle choices regarding food, transportation, and housing” (p. 123). Kroger and Winter go on to cite other researchers that show that materialistic values are related to depleting resources, having fewer environmentally friendly behaviors, and less environmental concern.

On the other hand, valuing spirituality leads to feeling connected to Nature and caring for nature. Hefler, Zeidler, and Cervinka’s (2009) research has shown a strong correlation between valuing spirituality and feeling connected to nature. Mayer and Frantz’s (2004) research has demonstrated that feeling connected to nature leads to caring for the environment and ecologically healthy behavior. In this regard the Bahá’í International Community (an NGO at the United Nations) writes,

*“The Bahá’í International Community is convinced that unless and until spiritual issues become central to the development process, the establishment of a sustainable global civilization will prove impossible. For the vast majority of the world’s people the idea that human nature is fundamentally spiritual is an incontrovertible truth. Indeed, this perception of reality is the defining cultural experience for most of the world’s people and is inseparable from how they perceive themselves and the world around them. It is, therefore, only by bringing a focus on the spiritual dimension of human reality that development policies and programs can truly reflect the experiences, conditions and aspirations of the planet’s inhabitants and elicit their heartfelt support and active participation.”* (2001, p. 1)

#### 5. THE APPROACH OF ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Saunders (cited in Kroger & Winter, 2010) has stated that Conservation Psychology is the “scientific study of the reciprocal relationships between humans and the rest of nature, with a particular focus on how to encourage conservation of the natural world” (p. 4). Environmental and conservation psychologists have focused on studying the psycho-social determinants of pro-environment behavior (Bamberg & Möser, 2007); on how to encourage pro-environmental behavior (Steg & Vlek, 2009); and on understanding commitment to the natural environment and ecological behavior (Davis, Le, & Coy, 2011), among many other related topics. Environmental psychologists provide hope that we can preserve the environment and provide suggestions and tools with which to encourage conservation of our beautiful natural world.

I am confident that when humans, in a collective act of will, integrate their spiritual values and love of beauty, with the knowledge being providing by the psychological science of the environment we will be able to maintain Nature in her most beautiful and healthy form; and Nature will help maintain humans in their most beautiful and healthy form.

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