A New Climate for Psychotherapy?

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This year finally saw implementation of the Kyoto protocol on climate change - or perhaps the remnants of it, as the United States has refused to ratify it and both China and India are designated developing countries and therefore not bound by its terms. Nonetheless its effects can be seen in an increasing amount of publicity for environmental issues as the demands of the treaty begin to affect daily life, however minimally. This may be an appropriate time to think about whether environmental issues should have any bearing on our practice as psychotherapists, and whether the theories that inform psychotherapy – in particular psychoanalysis – can have anything to contribute to debates about the environment. In this paper I pick up three possible areas of connection and then discuss their implications for the practice of psychotherapy.

Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Despite occasional maverick voices there is now general scientific agreement about the reality and seriousness of climate change as the reports of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change make clear. (Watson et al. 2001). There is also gathering anxiety about wider environmental degradation and its connection to world poverty. The long-held views of environmentalists are borne out by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, launched by Kofi Annan and published in April this year. This work by a panel of 1300 scientists from 95 countries, estimates that approximately 60 % of the world's 'ecosystem services', the natural products and processes which support life, are being used unsustainably. (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). The steps needed to mitigate these effects – in particular the reduction of carbon emissions - are major. They require big changes in patterns of economic activity and in the life-styles and behaviour of people in the developed nations. If no action is taken, the effects on both human and natural systems will be devastating and irreversible, effects which will be felt if not by us, by others whom we love and care for – our children, grandchildren, families and friends.

Although this information is commonly available and regularly makes headlines it has not been met by a wide public outcry. For the most part, people carry on as usual. If the news about climate change and environmental degradation makes them anxious and upset they do not show it. They continue to book foreign flights, leave their homes un-insulated, commute by car and purchase the latest fun gadget, regardless of how or where

it was manufactured. When demands are made which remind people of the uncomfortable truths behind these actions of everyday life, many react with irritation, complaint or indignation. Newspapers carry stories of protest against recycling schemes (seen as inconvenient, smelly or hard work), of opposition to wind energy (seen as noisy, ugly, or inefficient) or of resistance to traffic management (seen as unfair, restrictive, authoritarian). Surveys of public opinion confirm extremely contradictory attitudes. Knowledge and concern about climate change is widespread but it is disconnected from the knowledge that changes in behaviour and aspiration are needed. A survey carried out for the WWF in 2001 (WWF 2001) found that nearly 90% of people were in favour of the government doing more to reduce the UK's global warming pollution, while a survey carried out by MORI for the industry pressure group 'Freedom to Fly' in the same year, (www.mori.com/polls) found that 76% of people thought that air travel should be allowed to grow to match rising consumer demand, that 80% of people thought it important for them to be able to choose to fly where and when they wanted and that 80% of people hoped to fly as often or more frequently in the future. A survey carried out for the BBC in 2004 found that although a majority of Britons accepted that human activity was responsible for climate change 43% didn't expect it to have much effect on them personally, and only a minority - just 37% - would agree to pay more for petrol. (BBC 2004).

It is undeniable that macro political processes are involved here. The demands of an economic system based on continual growth, the self-perpetuation of power elites and the manipulation of information are clearly central to any discussion of the problems. It is also true that the questions are extremely complex. There are few universally agreed solutions and much debate. It is likely that many people feel ill-equipped to deal with the arguments and powerless to have any effect. Also involved however are psychological processes familiar to psychotherapists. This is also a story of anxiety, denial, splitting and projection, experienced and expressed at the social rather than at the individual level.

Anxiety, denial, splitting and projection

When Freud first wrote about denial (or disavowal as it is sometimes translated) he identified it as a response to something in the external world which is experienced as traumatic. His example was the small boy's discovery that the little girl does not possess a penis. (Freud 1923 and 1924). Although Klein later developed the concept in relation to the internal world (Klein 1946) it is this earlier notion of denial as a response to trauma that is most relevant here. "It can't be true," is a familiar reaction to any shock and an important protective mechanism which allows a horrific or distressing truth to be assimilated gradually. A temporary split occurs in the ego – what is known in one part of the mind is unknown in another, thus allowing ordinary life, in some form, to continue. If it is impossible – for whatever reason – to allow this gradual assimilation of the unwelcome truth, then the split becomes permanent and further splits are likely to follow as the original divisions become insufficient to contain the anxiety. Things which are connected are experienced as having nothing to do with one another. The problem itself is re-located to an area of experience which is deemed more manageable. The individual's own powers and abilities are projected into others who it is hoped will take care of the problem and can be criticised and attacked if they do not. To understand how this takes

place at the collective level it is necessary to consider the development of a number of social phenomena that might not ordinarily be seen as connected.

Shopping, regulation and therapy

Parallel to the environmental crisis are three other social movements which I think are worth considering as related phenomena: – the development of shopping as a leisure activity, the growth of a risk averse society and the development of psychotherapy, counselling and other forms of healing.

'Consumerism' has long been attacked by society's moral guardians as evidence of moral decline. Contemporary labels of disapproval such as the 'effluent society' and 'affluenza' replace older ones such as 'the throw-away society' and 'conspicuous consumption'. The long tradition of English puritanism can always be relied on to disapprove of anything enjoyable, dubbing it feckless and self-indulgent, and promising damnation in some form or another for those who succumb. It is not my purpose to join such voices, rather to look at the anxiety which may lie behind the contemporary drive to spend, acquire and consume. Consumer credit in March 2005 stood at £186.4 billion while government statistics show that retail sales have more than doubled since 1987. The lines of cars queuing to enter out of town supermarkets, near-riots when a new IKEA store opens and the throngs of people enjoying Sunday outings to shopping complexes suggest that shopping has become an essential part of social life rather than the means to an end. For many people it is now a key leisure activity. Repeated studies have shown that increased affluence does not bring happiness, the latest in a long line being that of Richard Layard whose popular book came out this year. (Layard 2005). We continue to go shopping however. What might be going on here?

If, as I am suggesting, awareness of environmental degradation and its related social and political problems produces unbearable anxiety, then shopping brings relief. As well as being an inevitable and essential component of capital's constant search for new markets, it functions as the actual act of denial that anything is wrong. Shopping, with its cornucopia of delights, its visual, tactile and auditory appeals to the senses, its promises of enjoyment and pleasure says symbolically – 'All is well. This is what you are meant to be doing. This is the way to satisfy need.' There is collective comfort in the knowledge that everyone is doing the same thing. A sense of normality comes with the awareness of others engaged in similar pursuits and the overall experience provides a soothing protection from stories of war, destruction and pain. In Kleinian terms the market at the moment of purchase is an idealised breast, a huge part-object whose beneficence is never questioned. Just as the hungry infant does not ask how the breast has acquired the milk, so the traumatised public does not question how the market has acquired its goods, nor who or what may have been damaged in the process.

Anxiety cannot be kept at bay however. It returns, intruding into the experience of shopping in a variety of forms. Shopping may develop a manic quality, having to be constantly repeated. Purchases quickly lose their capacity to soothe and new ones have to be sought. This is publicly validated in rapidly changing fashions, not just in clothes but in interior design and in consumer 'durables' such as motor cars, fridges and washing machines. It is supported by television 'make-over' programmes offering transformational experiences via new furnishings, gardens or home improvements. The

destructive side of such manic behaviour is split off and criticised in the public shaming of those whose lives collapse in response: television programmes explore compulsive shopping and ruinous credit card debt as individualised addictions alternately requiring treatment and moral condemnation.

Another way in which the anxiety returns is in periodic scares over safety and quality: salmonella in eggs, the pesticide alar in apples, VOCs in carpets, the dye sudan 1 in chilli powder. Reassurance is then offered that this was a ‘one-off’ event, a minimal risk or a problem that has now been contained. Such scares are rarely seen as part of a larger, connected problem. For some people the fear that harm may come through their purchases leads to the anxious pursuit of products that are guaranteed free from risk. Many such purchases embody the fearful hope that one can be exempt from the general, collective difficulties that threaten – a larger car to be better protected against a crash or organic food to be safe from chemicals. The knowledge that the larger car is a greater threat to pedestrians and that the organic food has been flown from overseas at damaging cost to the environment then has to be denied and split off again.

Shopping thus expresses both the denial of anxiety and the periodic return of that anxiety as the defence fails to contain it. Further collective strategies of defence become necessary.

Risk-averse society

Many commentators remark critically on the fact that we seem to have become a much more risk-averse society in the last twenty years. (Furedi 1997 and 2002, O’Neill 2002). The question ‘What if something should go wrong?’ dominates life in a way which it did not thirty years ago. There is clearly a fear of disaster and a desire to be protected from it. The response has been the development of systems of tight control over the work of certain sections of society, primarily professional people and public servants who have responsibility for public welfare. Teachers are told what they can teach and exactly how. Doctors are instructed in the correct protocols for examining any set of symptoms. Civil servants are asked to develop systems for monitoring, measuring and regulating themselves and others.

The obsessional nature of much of this activity is clear: systems, routines and rituals come to dominate large areas of working life in the public sector just as they dominate the personal life of someone suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. And like most obsessional routines these ones also run the risk of destroying the things they are trying to protect. The compulsive hand-washer who tries to remove all trace of bacteria ends by destroying her naturally protective skin. Monitoring a service becomes more important than actually delivering it and gradually the service itself disappears. From time to time complaints surface. Newspapers report that teachers have become afraid to take pupils on out-of-school trips, that the WI will no longer bake cakes and that doctors have to fill forms rather than talk to patients. The response from higher up, whether from senior managers or from government, is usually to blame the practitioner. The teacher is told not to be so cautious; the WI are told they have misinterpreted the rules; doctors are told to re-assess their priorities. This mirrors the way the patient will often be blamed. Her anxiety is seen as unrealistic, she is advised to control it and modify her behaviour.

The bigger question – what is the cause of all this anxiety? - is rarely asked. There is little discussion of why people have become so fearful and whether it is realistic to be frightened of these particular dangers. Some clues may be sought in where the anxiety is – and is not – focused. We appear to be most worried about public sector workers and others whose role is to help. Teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, anyone involved with children and anyone in a public service find their work made increasingly difficult by a barrage of mistrust and regulation. At the same time regulation is either removed from the international stage or proves impossible to negotiate. Free trade and the liberalisation of markets are demanded by the big players on the international scene, demands which seem to lead inevitably to the destruction of local economies, disregard for the environment and no protection for the workforce. In the absence of international regulation, these things become costs which cannot be factored in if a company is to survive. Drawing up lists for how teachers should teach and doctors prescribe is a possible task. Regulating an out-of-control economic system which is wrecking the world's environment is much more difficult. The psychological solution is to displace the anxiety and the obvious candidates are those who might be expected to look after us. It is thus no coincidence that perception of risk has moved to public servants and people in caring or parental roles who are unconsciously felt not to be doing enough to keep people safe. It is important to be clear that the mechanism is not one of conspiracy but of a collective, unconscious defence. Questions about the relative seriousness of the risks posed by people in public service and the risks posed by the actions of multi-national companies cannot be asked: to do so would be to attack the defence. It should perhaps also be noted that when the right-wing press complain about a 'nanny state' and the government respond, it is almost always regulations relating to health and safety or protection of the environment that are being attacked rather than regulation relating to the actions of professionals. Thus the minister Ruth Kelly refuses to impose nutritional standards on school meals – to do so would bring her into conflict with the privatised market in school dinners. So we live with the paradox that those with the most personally responsible jobs are treated like dangerous and irresponsible children while the free-wheeling mavericks in charge of industry are deemed capable of behaving in an adult and far-sighted way.

The defences of denial, splitting and projection are extremely primitive ones. Freud was clear that they were the gateway to delusion - that they were an attempt at self-preservation that took an individual to the edge of madness and sometimes beyond. It is likely that the collective form of these defences described here will also have personal consequences.

The growth of the healing professions

I turn now to the third social movement which I argue is connected – the growth of psychotherapy, counselling and all manner of other therapies. As a psychotherapist I obviously think that the work I do is valuable and necessary. That does not stop me asking however why this historical period finds it necessary to pay attention to psychological misery in this way. Why do individual needs feel so huge and so unmet? Why does individual distress seem to be more widespread and more acute? Why do so many people turn not just to the mainstream psychological therapies but to all manner of practices, from homeopathy to crystal healing, which promise health, happiness or

salvation? One answer sometimes given is affluence. It is suggested that in the absence of material scarcity we can now afford to pay attention to other needs. Another suggests that the post-war generations lack moral fibre, are narcissistically self-indulgent and can't face hardship of any kind. A third suggests these things are a substitute for religion in a godless age while a fourth points to divorce, social fragmentation and the pressures and uncertainties of work.

There is probably truth in all of these positions. At a most general level one might expect to find that in a period of powerlessness and social upheaval people would look for personal solace. The more hopeless and impotent people feel at a global level, the more likely they are to turn to those who can promise relief in some form or another. In previous generations religion has filled this place. This is what Marx meant when he referred to it as 'the opium of the people'.[1] In our own, less godly age, alternative forms of salvation are sought and therapy is one of them.

There seems to be more to it however. It is not simply that there is more interest in a psychological or spiritual life. Anecdotally psychotherapists talk of an increase in the severity of the problems they deal with. There seem to be more people who might be classified as 'borderline'; more people cutting and self-harming, feeling seriously suicidal, gripped by intractable eating disorders or hopeless addictions. Reports on student mental health (AUCC 1999 and Royal College of Psychiatrists 2003) support this view. The defences people are using seem to be more primitive and less compatible with day to day life.

If, as I have suggested above, social and political events are calling forth more primitive defences at a collective level, then it would not be surprising to find this echoed in work with individual patients. Is it possible that the greater need for psychotherapy services stems not from any simplistic relationship between social upheaval and mental distress but from processes of social and collective denial which both use and reinforce primitive defences in the population as a whole? Heightened awareness of these defences and their personal consequences then leads both to the need for therapy and reinforces the rationale for a risk-averse and regulatory society. People generally experience each other as less sane, less responsible and less trustworthy than previous generations did. It then becomes all the more necessary to feel that the guardians of society are checked on and regulated.

My suggestion is thus that we are dealing with three interlocking social movements whose disconnectedness has come to seem wholly normal. To connect them threatens the collective defence but may also bring relief if, as in therapy, it allows the real problem to be faced. It is perhaps not surprising that I write this at a time when some small moves towards protecting people from the effects of climate change are being made. As one thing shifts, so new thoughts become possible.

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[1] 'Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.' (Marx 1844)

Infantilism and the environmental mother

The second area of connection which I wish to discuss concerns perceptions and attitudes towards the environment. Throughout written history in the West, the environment has frequently been conceived of as maternal. Mother earth has been a popular catchphrase for centuries and in most religions the deities of harvest, fertility and life itself are generally female. (Ceres, Demeter, Gaia, Frig, Astarte for example.) Although this connection has been pursued with enthusiasm by ecofeminists, (see for example Griffin 1978) the conception of nature as female can create problems for both environmentalists and feminists. The equation of male oppression of women with the technocratic destruction of nature leaves little space for men to engage with environmental issues while the woman/nature identification opens the door to essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality which may valorise women but still confine them. These issues have been discussed widely elsewhere - see for example, Biehl 1991, Merchant 1995, Soper 1995 and Plumwood 1993. My purpose here is simply to examine whether a psychological exploration of the metaphor yields any insight into contemporary attitudes to the environmental crisis.

Exactly what kind of mother, mother earth is, varies across time and cultures as do the representations of people's relation to her. She may be munificent, jealous, withholding, arbitrary or generous, while people appear as greedy, submissive, rapacious, fearful, or supplicant and adult or childlike in turn. She may be depicted as gloriously abundant or terrifyingly barren, fiercely protective or desperately damaged: these multiple images of motherhood and the maternal relation reflect different periods' relation to nature and the environment. Hidden in many contemporary attitudes towards environmental difficulties are attitudes towards the mother which are aggressively infantile or childlike. The emotions are consistent with the defences of denial, splitting and projection described above: envy, contempt, spite, greed and disdain. The position is frequently narcissistic. Beneath it – presumably – lie impotence and terror. The dynamic can be seen in some common phrases and attitudes.

"I need…"

If challenged on their actions in relation to the environment many people cite need as justification, for example:

- "I need to drive because of my work."
- "I'll have to fly abroad. I need a proper break and I need to be sure of getting some sunshine."
- "I need a 4x4 to carry my tools for work."
- "My children are overseas – if I'm going to see them, I'll have to fly."

In all these examples, desire or demand has been translated into need. This is of course part of the inexorable push of capitalism towards increased consumption, where one generation's dreams and luxuries become another's taken for granted necessity. But – in the light of current knowledge – these things are also an individual choice and an individual sleight of hand and self-deception. Emotionally, the model is that of the three or four year old child who has learned the power of the phrase "I need" and who changes his demand from an expression of desire to one of necessity: "Mummy, I *need* another chocolate biscuit." "I *need* to watch television, *now*." As the child gets older his

justifications become more sophisticated but the assumption remains: the mother has a never-ending supply of whatever is desired and is being mean in refusing it; she must be tricked into giving it up by an appeal to her maternal nature.

In all these examples, there is a refusal to respond to the reality principle and a subsequent descent into a more childish relation to the environment around one. In the callous phrase, "The world can take it," one hears the voice of the infant who has not reached Winnicott's stage of concern. The phrase expresses both the belief that the mother's munificence is endless and the refusal to acknowledge that this munificent mother is the same person as the tired, depleted or unresponsive one. In relation to the environment it encapsulates the belief that one's actions have no effect, that environmental degradation bears no relation to consumption. The alternative would be the painful and uncomfortable emotions of the depressive position – grief, guilt, sorrow, regret and the hard work of adjustment to a reality that cannot supply all that is desired. It is perhaps not surprising that many people prefer to see the natural world as a withholding and unreasonable mother who can be cajoled or railed against, rather than as a damaged one who must be succoured and sustained.

"Why should I…?"

"Why should I? (Recycle/reduce consumption/agree to a local wind turbine) "No-one else is."

This is the sibling's complaint. The assumption is that one is being unfairly treated. One's coevals are all rivals and someone else is getting privileges that one is not. Closely related are the sounds of other primary-school protests: "I don't want to. I don't like it. I can't be bothered. Do I have to?"

In this emotional dynamic the mother is seen as demanding something difficult while favouring somebody else. The underlying desire is to return to the position of the privileged infant, to be the baby of the family again. It carries in it the threat of the spoiling gesture, the wilful or defiant protest that will upset mother's plans. The mother may be seen as mean, ungenerous and withholding or alternatively as controlling, invasive and demanding. In either case, the child's impulse is to resist, to assert that he or she is big enough to take his or her own decisions and find a way to outwit mother.

In a variation on this theme there is a more oedipal dynamic. The authority who demands change may be seen as the repressive father who is denying access to the desired mother, keeping her pleasures for himself. He can then be complained against or decried as incompetent. ("Bloody council. Bloody awkward boxes. Bet they don't do their recycling.")

Whistling in the dark

A third type of infantile attitude lies behind statements like:

- "If it was really important, they'd have made us do something by now."
- "They'll find a technological answer."
- "What difference can I make?"
- "It's alarmist – these people like to frighten us."

All these phrases express the childlike assumption that there are adults in charge. The first phrase implies an indulgent mother who never carries out her threats. She may say, “No TV until you’ve tidied your room,” but she doesn’t mean it and doesn’t have to be taken seriously. Because this mother always relents and gives way to the child’s demand, the child never has to make judgments for herself about what is or is not necessary. Does my room need tidying? Is the world in a mess? Mum will sort it out.

The second phrase suggests that father will come to mother’s aid – perhaps a new washing machine or some handy tranquillisers will do the job. Maybe some hydrogen fuel cells or a couple of nuclear power stations. In any event, it is not a matter for children.

The third phrase betrays the beginnings of fear. Rather than explore the possibilities of personal and political action it suggests a retreat to the position of the child who realises with horror that something big is happening in the adult world and that she is too small to affect it.

The final phrase suggests a further retreat as the frightened child tries to convince herself that the danger she faces is not real but a mean trick or a nasty dream. The characterisation is now of an abandoning and possibly monstrous mother. Indulgence – as it often does – has flipped into its opposite. This child is whistling in the dark.

Maturity and masculinity

The flip-side of this attitude to the environment-mother is the equation of maturity (particularly masculine maturity) with the ability to dominate and exploit her. The desire is to escape her control and influence. The underlying fantasy is that she no longer matters and perhaps that she never did. Adulthood becomes equated with self-creation: through technological dominance and expertise man makes himself. When Margaret Thatcher said in 1986 “A man who beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself a failure,”[2] she laid down an ideological and cultural marker: a man without a car of his own is not truly a man. He can consider himself castrated. Her statement built on a twentieth century tradition of equating the power and speed of the internal combustion engine with sexual prowess but took it further so that the car, the most profligate contributor to climate change, becomes an essential part of masculine identity.

Masculine maturity in this articulation is sharply individualistic, harsh and self-seeking. It is identified with material success rather than emotional development. ‘Realism’ is seen in the self-interested acquisition of house, car, holidays and other advantages rather than in a thoughtful consideration of other people or of social and political conditions. Behind this lies contempt for the mother: it is a deeply narcissistic version of maturity which turns away from the real relationship to the natural world.

The position of women in this is little easier. Patriarchal attitudes have rarely valued feminine maturity in a real way, preferring either to idealise or denigrate it. And since actual motherhood is now something that must fit in with work, tucked into the spaces

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[2] The remark is often quoted, most recently in a parliamentary debate in June 2004, but I cannot find its original source.

around a career, women are less likely to identify their own nurturing capacities symbolically with the natural environment. Thus they may come to share in the common contempt. They too may feel that the mature and realistic position is to be too busy or important to worry about environmental concerns. Their relationship to the environment-mother becomes as troubled as their male counterparts.

In all of these characterisations there is the loss of a loving and mutual maternal relation. Instead of being powerful but benign, mother earth has become a withholding, threatening and abandoning parent struggling with a spiteful, jealous and destructive child. What is missing is the sense of a relationship between an adult child and an adult mother, of the generational shift as children become parents in their turn and discover in their own maturity the pleasures of respect and care between the generations. Instead, all seems infantile. The metaphors we live reflect the difficulties we find ourselves in.

Repression and guilt in the environmental movement

My third area of connection concerns those who struggle to make the connections which I suggest society in general refuses. What happens to the people in the environmental movement who argue and campaign for change? What happens to the ordinary people who take up their challenge and try to live a more responsible life-style? Are they exempt from the characteristics I have described above? Do they display an enviable sanity and integration? The answer of course is no. As in any other section of the population, personal characteristics are an individual matter as well as a cultural one. What is interesting however is the way in which the threats of environmental destruction tend to affect these groups of people. Their personal experience of the issues is different and this is likely to encourage different psychological defences at the public and societal level. Repression, guilt and an over-developed super-ego seem to be the fate of those who become active.

People in this position have to repress the desires for unbridled consumption which they share with the rest of the population. Saying ‘no’ to some of the things which make modern life comfortable is not always easy and renunciation rarely leads to public support, let alone gratitude. As one person remarked, an irritated car driver is more likely to knock you off your bicycle than to thank you for reducing the nation’s carbon emissions. It can be a lonely position and one effect of repression can be an emphasis on the moral high ground.

This moral framework is frequently expressed in the way environmental issues are written about publicly. They are presented as a question of ethics, not in the complex sense in which the philosophers of the environmental movement consider them (see for example Soper 1995) but as narrow questions of moral rectitude and self-sacrifice. It is to the credit of the environmental movement that a moralising tone is largely absent from their own writings. In the pages of ‘Clean Slate’ ‘The Ecologist’ ‘Ethical Consumer’ and the like you are more likely to find rational argument and cheerful encouragement than moral exhortation. It is in the newspapers that the moral imperative rules. The expectation is that an ecologically sustainable life will be a difficult and worthy one, lacking in enjoyment or ordinary pleasures.

Typical of this tone are the recent (2004) articles by Leo Hickman in the Guardian newspaper, in which he described his attempt to live a less environmentally damaging

life-style. They were subsequently drawn together as a book titled, (unsurprisingly) 'A Good Life".(Hickman 2005) The titles of the articles introduce the moral tone – 'Do the right thing', 'How to be good', 'Mens sana in corpore sano', 'On the right track' and so on. In the introductory piece (January 24th 2004) Leo's expectations are clear – he expects to be found wanting and fears that he will suffer. "At times it seems that there are few highs and many lows - you always seem to feel guilty," he writes. He expects that life with the environmental auditors will be a "…drawn-out exercise in self-flagellation," which can only be protected against with a sense of humour. As the series develops he appears in turn anxious, irritable, guilty and occasionally evangelical. His language rarely deviates from that of the moral imperative: conscience and what he 'should' do is at its heart.

What creates this moralising agenda? As I have suggested above it must result in part from the repression of desire. But it must also be a function of the relationship between a majority population which avoids or denies guilt and a minority into whom this same guilt can be evacuated. Society as a whole needs to do something with its guilt about environmental damage and environmental activists provide a handy peg on which to hang a split-off collective conscience. Easily caricatured as earnest, bearded killjoys, collective guilt can be lodged in them and then attacked through mockery and satire. "Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of chaps with face fungus," quipped Simon Hoggart in his account of the Green Party's election manifesto (Guardian April 8th 2005) in a fairly typical example. Through ridicule, the worrying pressure of reality and the irritating presence of guilt are both neutralised and the status quo is resumed. Nothing to worry about. Business as usual.

The effects of this dynamic on activists are multiple and variable as projected guilt interacts with individual psyches. One possibility is that of a collusive marriage: the negative stereotypes are accepted and embraced. The activist becomes a ferocious, moralising puritan, safe in the knowledge of her own salvation, ungiving and condemnatory of all who fail to reach her standards. The advice she gives becomes deliberately unpalatable, the practices she advocates become hair-shirt, impossible extremes and it is clear that she takes satisfaction in others' failures. She finds like-minded people and together they separate themselves off from the rest of society and its desires. The secondary satisfactions of masochistic self-denial are embraced.

A second route is that of internalised guilt and burn-out. This is a familiar scenario to people working in the voluntary sector as well as in political movements. Enthusiasm and idealism give way to exhaustion and disillusion. The young person – it is often a young person – driven by an unexamined history of their own guilt takes on the burdens of the world. There is always too much to do and it seems impossible to say 'No'. The needs of the other – in this case the planet or mother earth – become paramount. The person's sense of agency and effectiveness diminish in the face of the enormity of the injury they are trying to heal. Driving themselves to do more, often in the face of opposition, indifference or hatred, they eventually collapse.

A third route carries an element of narcissistic protection. This is the route of what might be called environmental super-heroics. Taking on the role of eco-warrior – or identifying with it – offers some protection against the destructiveness of an over-active super-ego. In Michael Balint's terms these people might be seen as philobats, (Balint 1958) the

thrill-seekers, restless champions of mother-earth. The importance of this route is not so much the actual heroics performed but their iconography and meaning for a wider audience. The activities of Greenpeace as detailed on their website through images and weblogs are a good example of this. *(http://weblog.greenpeace.org/)*. There are images of abseiling activists, a Greenpeace rib tiny against a Russian oil tanker, a series of pictures of swimmers boarding a deep-sea bottom trawler. Weblogs detail hair-raising encounters with angry fishermen and armed attacks by loggers in the Amazon. There are even 'Eco-quest' games where you can play out the role of hero from the safety of your computer at home. Although the weblogs make clear that the reality of such trips is 99% hard campaigning work and 1% terrifying adventure they provide the possibility of an alternative identification for the activist at home. They allow people both to ease the sense of guilt that not enough is being done and to counter the sense of being shamed by public perceptions of the environmental movement. Like good news from the front during a war, these adventures keep up the morale of the population at home.

A fourth route is that of retreat. This is an old solution, as old certainly as the romantics and stretching back through Rousseau to classical ideas of an age of gold or biblical ones of the garden of Eden. In this solution the past is seen as a better country, a time when people were in harmony with the natural world. Culture is opposed to nature, technology is opposed to environment, the country is valued more highly than the city and the primitive or indigenous is often idealised. Here, guilt is assuaged by the purity of one's own existence. Environmentalists who take this route exclusively run the risk of becoming isolated, pre-occupied with such matters as installing their own water supply or creating a self-sufficient food supply. At its extreme lie the paranoid fantasies of American survivalists and the nightmare of eco-fascism.

It is important to recognise that despite these negative possibilities as much sanity exists in the environmental movement as anywhere else in society. Important and creative work gets done, in research, in protection, in protest, in publicity and in demonstration by example. It is the nature of the work and its relation to the rest of society which makes particular psychological problems more common, particular collective defences more likely to be adopted. Some of them are common to other political groupings and other minorities. Some spring from the nexus of the way the relationships between culture and environment, technology and nature are lived at the beginning of the 21st century.

Only as collective guilt is shared can it become less extreme, be less persecutory and destructive and be managed in more creative ways. This only becomes possible when the issues become truly mainstream and the possibility of reparative action on an appropriate scale starts to seem realistic. Pressure from below needs to be matched by leadership from above. There have been some hopeful signs in recent years, starting perhaps with the article by the government chief scientist Sir David King in February 2004 in which he argued that climate change was a greater threat to the world than international terrorism. (King 2004). Increased publicity for the issues and stronger statements from respected figures help to create a more comfortable climate for activists. As the arguments are taken more seriously, the projections onto activists are reduced and a bigger space is created for sanity and creativity. Although conscious levels of collective anxiety may be raised in the short term, if real action follows then there is a chance that both this and the collective guilt can be relieved.

Issues for practice

If there is any truth in the analysis in this paper then it might have some relevance to the ways in which environmentalists pursue their work in publicity and education and in their demands on themselves. My primary purpose in the last part of this paper however is to discuss whether there are any implications for the practice of psychotherapy.

At one level it is a practical matter. Does one agree that there is an environmental crisis? Does one agree that this has psychological manifestations? At another it is a philosophical/ethical question. How one approaches it depends on how one conceives of the relationship between humans and the natural material world, between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’. Does one think of people as a part of the natural world or as separated from it by virtue of their intelligence and technological mastery? Is there any such thing as a ‘natural’ state, outside of society? Is it necessary to have a sense of divine immanence in nature or will an ethical economics and technology be sufficient? These and similar questions have been debated for a long time by environmental ethicists. Perhaps it is enough in this context simply to note that there is a tendency in contemporary society to behave as if people are not bound by the material world and to see it as endlessly manipulable. And to suggest that if, like me, you question this assumption, then the development of some kind of environmental-mindedness in relation to psychotherapy might be useful and appropriate.

Practically this might simply mean doing the responsible things that any household or small business might do – examining workplace use of environmental resources and trying to limit carbon emissions. Beyond this however there are matters specific to psychotherapy. Here it is necessary to think of psychotherapy as a cultural practice as well as a personal one and to allow a more coterminous idea of nature to penetrate our ideas about people, culture and society. If we can recognise that our everyday ideas and assumptions may be unconsciously governed by broader cultural movements then we can begin to ask questions about the relationship between environmental issues and personal life. We may become more alert to manifestations of anxiety or guilt about the environment. We may re-evaluate our views of destructive behaviour. We may explore despair about the future or longing for the past with a different slant.

To work in a sensitive and appropriate way with environmental difficulties in psychotherapy is not likely to be an easy matter. The cultural equations of masculine maturity with environmental mastery, of success with consumption, of environmental concern with puritanism, make it likely to be a hard task. How should one respond, for instance, to the young man who says proudly that he has passed his driving test and is acquiring his first car? Or to the young woman whose self-destructive impulse seems to be caught up in her activism? Does one analyse the narcissism in a patient’s desires for environmentally damaging activities, or stay silent because they mirror one’s own actions? Does one notice the manifestations of denial in a patient’s behaviour or ignore them because of the mutual discomfort acknowledgment would bring?

The answers to such conflicts must, as ever, start with the individual patient. But it is likely to be our environmental-mindedness which dictates whether or not we hear the hint of doubt in the boy’s voice as he tells us about the car and allows us to wonder what he has done with his knowledge of its damaging consequences. A similar awareness might

allow one to analyse the young woman's self-destructiveness while valuing her commitment and energy, perhaps enabling her to separate the two things and work more effectively in the campaigns she is involved in. Meanwhile, confronting our own fears, feelings and actions about environmental matters may free us up to a more comfortable awareness of our potential collusion with our patients' dilemmas and anxieties and bring a subtle but important re-emphasis to the work.

On the more positive side an awareness of social and cultural dynamics can of course make some aspects of psychotherapy easier. The hidden issue of eating disorders was only fore-grounded when feminists began to draw attention to the reification of women's bodies and suggest that there was something ideological in the nature of the masculine gaze and the feminine pre-occupation with the female form. From that moment on it became possible to speak differently in psychotherapy about bulimia, anorexia and compulsive eating.

To date, environmental questions do not seem to have found their way into the mainstream of psychotherapeutic thinking.[3] This is perhaps not surprising. The overt connections of the political and the personal which feminism promoted quite clearly led towards political actions on the one hand and psychological re-evaluations on the other. The psychological implications of environmental issues have perhaps been less obvious. We are not talking about the oppression of one group of people by another, but of a damaged or dangerous relationship to the natural world. The consequences of this may not find their way into psychotherapeutic practice in quite such definite and concrete forms but if we stay 'environmentally-minded' we may spot their manifestations, either as new configurations of old problems or as intensifications of familiar patterns of defence. An awareness of the ways in which individual psychological problems interpenetrate the social and cultural world may make us both better therapists and more responsible citizens.

To some extent we all choose which social and cultural issues we attune ourselves to, which ones we treat like the air we breathe, and which ones we come to question. These differences are part of what make us unique as therapists, draw some patients to us and turn others away, get us labelled as conventional, radical, conservative or feminist and so on. In this paper I have suggested that the urgent issue of the age is, as the chief government scientist argued, climate change. As psychotherapists we may feel that we have little to contribute practically but working as we do in the cultural soup of society we have a responsibility to understand and respond to the ways the issue works its way through the common and individual psyche and so respond, in the work, in ways which are not destructive either to the individual psyche or to the environment.

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[3] Where they have been explored it seems mainly to be in relation to 'ecopsychology', an approach influenced by 'deep ecology', ecofeminism, and Jungian ideas. See for example Prentice 2003 or Rust 2004.

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