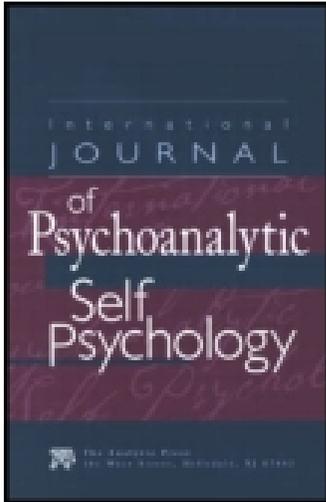


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REVIEW OF JOSEPH DODDS’ “PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ECOLOGY AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS”

TERRY MARKS-TARLOW, PH.D.

Keywords: chaos theory; climate change; complexity theory; contextualism; defense mechanisms; Deleuze and Guattari; ecocriticism; ecology; nonlinear science

Once in a while, a book enters the field of psychoanalysis that is so revolutionary that it turns everything upside down, causing us to question the very framework under which we operate. The *Myth of Mental Illness* by Thomas Szasz (1961) was one such book. Rather than to assume that craziness resides within individuals, Szasz flipped the focus to examine the role of psychiatry within society at large. Symptoms of mental illness, including psychosis, became “problems in living,” while the social dictates and extreme practices of psychiatry became problems, rather than solutions. Szasz asserted that lobotomies, forced drug treatment, and involuntary hospitalization were little more than social indoctrination and abuses of power perpetrated by psychiatric authorities. By dismissing psychiatry as pseudo-science, or scientism, a view echoed by Foucault (1988) and Goffman (1961), Szasz helped to widen the scope of psychoanalysis. By identifying the importance of culture and social framework, he

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illuminated how certain practices pose threats to people's freedom and dignity.

In some ways, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos* by Joseph Dodds (2011) is another revolutionary book that shifts our perspective through widening the scope of psychoanalysis still further. Dodds not only takes into account the cultural and social context in which our minds and profession reside, but he also includes the environmental context in which our bodies and other physical aspects of existence are housed. By pointing out that most psychoanalysts practice a psychology without ecology, his book reframes the nature of the problem once again, this time to address threats to the very life on Earth as we know it. When we sit with patients in the hermetically sealed environment of our offices and talk only about intrapsychic events and difficulties in "work and love" as if they exist in a vacuum, we stand in denial of some of the greatest problems the world has ever known. Dodds extends the social and political stance of contextualism (e.g., Altman, 2010; Cushman, 1995) one step further by including the importance of the physical environment.

Dodds joins the growing field of ecocriticism (Morton, 2007) by pointing out how the very embeddedness of mind and society within nature is what makes it so difficult to see what we are doing, feel the consequences of our actions, and think more broadly in ecological terms. The book opens with a punch, by presenting sobering statistics surrounding our planetary crisis:

- There was a 70% rise in greenhouse gas emissions between 1970 and 2004;
- The decade between 2000 to 2009 was the warmest on record;
- Between 20,000 and 2 million species became extinct during the 20th century, with the rate now accelerated to 140,000 species per year; and
- The last time there was a six degree rise in temperature, around 251 million years ago, it wiped out 90% of all known species.

Despite growing scientific consensus of these problems, little is actually being done. This gap is increasingly alarming when nonlinear science, including chaos and complexity theory, is used as a framework of understanding. From a linear point of view, where tiny inputs result in tiny outputs, the gradual change of the climate does not appear terribly dangerous. There appears to be plenty of time to gather our wits and make necessary changes. But from a nonlinear point of view, where tiny inputs carry the potential for enormous and catastrophic outputs, the possibility for radical and unpredictable change at any moment becomes ever

more likely. Given the certainty of such eventual tipping points, including catastrophic levels of change from which there is no return, Dodds' book becomes a call to arms. And as the old banner proclaims, “If psychoanalysis is not part of the solution, then psychoanalysis becomes part of the problem.”

Dodds defines the current crisis not only as an ecological problem, but also as a crisis of theory, where a failure of thought leads to systems blindness. That is, due to the divided nature of our fields of knowledge and the tendency for different schools of psychological thought to compete with one another, we lack the connecting threads that enable a more system-wide, comprehensive point of view. In Dodds words:

Climate change embodies a world of unpredictable, multiple-level, highly complex, nonlinear interlocking systems, and to fully grasp the threat on a psychological, group, community, national and global level, and the resulting interactions with local regional and planetary ecology, is more than any one intellectual field can encompass. Psychoanalysis has an important role to play as part of a wider ecology of ideas, but there is a need for a kind of meta-perspective or meta-theory able to integrate the many disparate strands (disparate in terms of our arbitrary divisions, not in terms of how the world really works). (2011, p. 15)

This is where chaos and complexity theories come in, especially as interpreted through the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2000, 2003a, 2003b). Here the perspective of nonlinear science is offered, not to serve as a “master-theory,” the idea of which has been reviled by post-modernists, but instead, nonlinear science is offered as a kind of “nomadic” theory, able to wander freely across disciplines in order to link different strands of knowledge in a loose and flexible “meshwork.” Dodds offers a bi-directional call to arms: one that brings nonlinear and ecological thinking into psychoanalysis as a framework, while inserting a psychoanalytic approach within ecology as a means to unite the “three ecologies” of mind, nature, and society.

After introducing the ecological problem in the first section, the second section of *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos* employs tools of psychoanalysis to examine the burning question of how science can possess full knowledge of these catastrophic tendencies related to climate change, without people implementing significant action in response to this

knowledge. Several chapters address this historical blind spot, beginning with Freud, who Dodds credits with implicitly anticipating the current crisis, by identifying our relationship to nature “based on a master-slave system of absolute binaries, and on attempt to maintain an illusory autonomy and control in the face of chaos” (2011, p. 32). According to Freud’s (1930) psychoanalytic formulation of Western culture, humanity is portrayed as a weak, helpless infant in fear of a mighty and terrible Mother, while civilization serves as a defense against her wildness, both at inner and outer levels. Borne out of fear and trembling in the face of Mother Nature’s awesome power, the defensive constructs of a patriarchal civilization lend the infant humanity feelings of mastery, yet represent “dangerous illusions of control.”

In the face of our failure to address pending ecological disaster, Dodds examines the importance of the classical defense mechanisms. Here, overwhelming anxiety is conceived to be avoided through various intrapsychic tactics, such as splitting, intellectualization, denial, displacement, suppression, or repression. One important question he poses is whether the central dynamic involves anxiety arising as a response to the enormity of the problem, whose overwhelm is subsequently defended against, versus the possibility that anxiety arises out of a problem so huge and abstract as to remain incomprehensible on a human, emotional scale. Different educational and strategic responses result from each possibility; meanwhile, chances are good that both factors are operating simultaneously.

Along with examining classical defense mechanisms, Dodds reviews a host of psychoanalytic thinkers whose writing is relevant to the ecological problem. He discusses the contribution object relations theory makes toward understanding our civilization’s highly ambivalent relation to the “other-than-human” world. Here, Dodds draws upon Klein’s (1987) developmental stages, including the fantasy of the infinitely giving Earth-breast, the paranoid–schizoid response to necessary weaning, and the necessity of moving towards the depressive position, with its desire for reparation in the face of losses, grief and disappointments. Dodds also reviews contributions that Bion makes both to individual and group psychology. A primary example is the work of “linking,” (Bion, 1959) by which mental objects become connected meaningfully. Bion also addresses the attack on linking characterized by psychotic states of mind that can lead to the “bizarre objects” of schizophrenic hallucination.

Dodds also draws upon psychoanalytic theory in order to frame solutions for how to confront our defenses arising in response to this “shadow”

side of culture. As early as 1960, Harold Searles discussed the psychological importance of the "non-human" environment. More recently, Erich Fromm (2001) suggested that the human project of winning greater freedom from external oppression carries the cost of a sense of isolation and aloneness as well as disconnection and isolation from nature. According to Joanna Macy (1995), who developed solution-oriented "despair and empowerment" workshops, the first step involves allowing oneself to feel the problem. This includes a whole range of emotions, such as fear concerning the future, despair at the lack of political will and effectiveness, grief over irreversible losses, and guilt over continuing to participate as part of the cause.

From the vantage point of contemporary psychoanalysis, such as represented in this journal, there are two serious flaws in Dodds' book. The first is his plethora of antiquated psychoanalytic concepts, all based on one-person theories. By omitting the advancements made into two-person perspectives of relational psychoanalysis and intersubjectivity over the past 25 years, Dodds overlooks the degree to which his ideas are a natural extension of contextualism (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Hoffman, 1991; Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow, 1997; Stern, 1997). The second problem is Dodds' failure to address the importance of dissociation as a defense mechanism. Especially in the context of trauma, dissociation has now superseded repression as a primary coping strategy with clear neurobiological underpinnings (Dell and O'Neil, 2009).

In the third section, Dodds illuminates the incipient fields of ecopsychology and ecopsychanalysis. There is an interesting, albeit rather strange chapter that analyzes our lost connection with nature as represented by horror films containing half human, half animal creatures. While I had always conceptualized my own children's young adolescent, fascination with horror films pathologically, as an attempt to break through psychic numbness with ever greater forms of stimulation, this chapter suggests our cultural fascination with such horrors represents something a bit kinder, as our society's attempts to "re-wild" ourselves. In other ways of addressing our lost connection with nature, therapies have sprung up beyond the sterile walls of our offices. Patients are brought by therapists into the wilds of nature, where life is often highly stimulating, but the lack of clear boundaries can be simultaneously confusing for the patient/therapist relationship.

In the fourth section of *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos*, Dodds introduces the relevance of chaos and complexity theories

for understanding and addressing these ecological problems. Concepts covered include fractals, phase space, swarm intelligence, stigmergy, self-organization, and emergence. In the process of explaining these ideas and using examples, Dodds also summarizes the work of a host of a number of psychoanalytic and psychological writers who have embraced nonlinear science as an organizing framework, a smattering of which include Gottman et al. (2003), Guastello (2004), Kelso (1995), Marks-Tarlow (1999, 2008), Miller (1999), Palombo (1999, 2007), Piers, Muller, and Brent (2007), Pincus (2001), and Scharff (2000). Yet Dodds' omission of other psychoanalytic theorists who have embraced a complexity perspective, including William Coburn, Robert Galatzer-Levy, Donnell Stern, and Robert Stolorow, is unfortunate.

Perhaps because of its ambitious agenda, as well as the novelty of the enterprise, by the end of the book, the degree and urgency with which Dodds flits across various theories and writers begins to feel fragmented. While the presentation of the problem is awesome in scope, the presentation of the solution is quite thin, limited primarily to the quite idiosyncratic perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, who readily make up their own concepts and language. The synthesis of ideas is restricted to one short chapter at the end of the book, described by the author as the penultimate chapter, yet due to its idiosyncratic language and use of nonlinear science, winds up to the uninitiated as somewhat underwhelming.

After such a powerful start, by the end of the book, the reader is left feeling fed lots of wonderful undigested bits that have not quite yet congealed into an integrated whole. Unfortunately, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos* lacks the original voice of an author able to present an overarching view and original synthesis that would truly bring everything together. That said, in my opinion, Dodds is more than forgiven in light of the importance and enormity of the project. Despite its shortcomings, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos* remains a seminal book that introduces a new area of focus that should be read by any psychoanalyst interested in preserving the world for their children and grandchildren.

Most psychoanalysts have moved from one-person models that examine the patient dynamics and psyche as if in a vacuum to two-person models that consider how the psyches of therapist and patient interlock and co-create dynamics. Most psychoanalysts also include race, class, and politics in their understanding of the importance of context. Few have expanded our frame of reference to consider how every single human life and relationship depends intimately on the global workings of the Earth's

ecology. As stewards of this earth, it is time to break out of the narrow, egocentric framework, which, if it continues, threatens the existence of the very climate and its capacity to support life on this planet. Perhaps after taking in the wealth of knowledge and perspectives that Dodds has to offer, someone will stand on the shoulder of giants to seek and offer a global cure.

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