TOWARDS DEGROWTH? MAKING PEACE WITH MORTALITY TO RECONNECT WITH (ONE'S) NATURE: AN ECOPSYCHOLOGICAL PROPOSITION FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the existential conditions for a transition towards socio-economic degrowth through the analysis of a paradigm shift between two extreme polarities of socio-ecological positioning: the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) and the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP). It is suggested that the transition from one to the other – which is seen as the first step to move collectively towards degrowth – requires a transformation in the way we, as Western humans, define ourselves in relation to nature. This identity transformation corresponds to the reconnection between humans and nature that ecopsychology has been calling for since its emergence in the 1970s. However, according to recent empirical studies in existential psychology, such a transformation contains potentially disquieting aspects, since it implies recognizing and accepting the idea of our own mortality. The article argues that a transition towards degrowth requires new ways of dealing with these existential fears – confronting them in a "reflexive" instead of a "defensive" way – so as to develop relationships with nature that respect the limits of the biosphere. Practical implications are explored through a dialogue between ecopsychology and degrowth.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

This article adopts a perspective in ecopsychology (Roszak, 1992) to revisit ongoing debates on the possible and desirable pursuit of economic growth in the context of "planetary boundaries" (Rockström *et al.* 2009; Steffen *et al.* 2015). In the wake of the first academic studies that brought to light physical limits to economic growth (Meadows 1972, 2004), various positions have been questioning the growth imperative, calling for a transition to a global steady-state economy (Daly 1973; Victor, 2008), made possible in particular by the degrowth of the wealthiest economies (Research and Degrowth, 2010; Fritz and Koch, 2016). Responding to these critics, other positions have argued in favor of the benefits of continuing on a "green" path of economic growth, supported mainly by technological innovation (Cuaresma, Palokangas, and Tarasyev 2015; OECD 2017). The growth imperative remains the main political driver of our economies (Schmelzer 2016), reflecting a stubborn denial of the Earth's physical limits (Wijkman and Rockström 2012). How can this hegemony of economic growth be understood? Is it just a matter of historical or institutional path dependency (Clark 2007)? Could there perhaps also be something inside of us – a set of emotional and psychological characteristics – that unconsciously conspires to preserve growth's stranglehold (Arnsperger 2005, 2009; Jackson 2009)?

Exploring these questions seems essential in order to anchor the degrowth movement, at a more individual and psychological level, thus complementing the collective and institutional levels already extensively studied by the degrowth theorists and practitioners (Griethuysen, 2010; D'Alisa, 2014; Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018). Sustainable degrowth emerged as an appeal for a "... radical political and economic reorganization" (Kallis *et al.* 2018), in the service of

ecological sustainability, social justice, democracy and quality of life (Fritz & Koch, 2014). As a radical political project, it embraces interrelated political and cultural changes, capable of advancing degrowth as a "positive social development" (Kallis, 2011). Far from being a totalitarian initiative, degrowth is rather "a matrix of alternatives which re-opens a space for creativity by raising the heavy blanket of economic totalitarianism" (Latouche, 2010: 520).

As a "radical" approach, ecopsychology shares common objectives with degrowth. Emerging in the United States in the 1970s in reaction to heightened awareness of rampant ecological degradation, ecopsychology challenges "the underlying systems that produce and maintain personal suffering, social oppression and mistreatment of the earth" (Fisher, 1996: 2). By both putting into question the development model of Western civilization, degrowth and ecopsychology share the same concerns for ecological sustainability, welfare, and global social justice (Roszak, 1995; Manning and Amel, 2014; Pye, 2014). More generally, both harbour the objective of reforming Western nature-society relationships, and both encourage "bottom-up" initiatives. However, each of the two approaches seems to have become "specialized" in specific ways of doing this, which are nevertheless mutually compatible.

According to ecopsychology the erosion of the bond between humans and nature in modern Western civilization is one of the roots of the current ecological crisis (Shepard. 1982). Nature is understood in this article as a "metaconcept" (Hess, 2013), which refers to a set of possible meanings (see Eriksson in this issue). In ecopsychology, nature encompasses both human and non-human entities, as well as ecosystems in a broad sense. The main objective of ecopsychology is to understand the profound, sometimes unconscious reasons of the erosion of this bond and to restore it, i.e., to help in creating or recreating cultures that function in harmony with the natural environment on which they depend (Kanner, 2014).

While ecopsychology focuses on a rather individual level of analysis based on the exploration of the complex and unconscious motivations of human behaviour, degrowth offers a more

structural and institutional level of analysis by proposing new ways of organizing socio-economic and political dynamics. Both levels are crucial and they are, in fact, complementary in important ways that need to be investigated more in depth. Accordingly, this article adopts a transversal perspective in order to shed light on these complementarities, as an appeal for heightened dialogue between both approaches.

The first section captures the divergent ideological positions at play in the debate around economic growth. Environmental sociology offers a framework for this through the notion of *socioeconomic paradigms*. Two of these – representing clear-cut polarities – are explored: the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) and the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP). Each paradigm gathers a specific, coherent corpus of beliefs about the ecological situation and the economic growth imperative, and is underpinned by a specific vision of nature, of humans and of the relationships they ought to entertain.

Moving from one paradigm to another involves a transformation of ethics and identity, a mutation in the way we conceive of ourselves as humans – as separate from nature in the DSP, as an integral part of nature in the NEP. The transition from the former to the latter reflects the heeding of ecological limits to economic growth. As we will see, the NEP seems to bring together degrowth's main critiques of wealthy Western countries, i.e., the limits to economic growth, to progress through material accumulation, and to technology and free markets as solutions to environmental problems (Schneider, 2010). The NEP can also be seen as embodying the "reconnection" of humans to nature that ecopsychology has been calling for since its emergence in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the empirical work on existential psychology mobilized in the article suggests that this reconnection might be disquieting. Indeed, it implies the recognition that although we, as humans, are part of nature, this also makes us subject to its laws, i.e., inevitable ultimate mortality (Vess and Arndt 2008). It is therefore essential to explore the existential conditions for, and the existential barriers to, this reconnection between

humans and nature so as to facilitate the transition to the NEP. This will be the object of the second section.

In the third section, I discuss some leads to facilitate the transition to degrowth through the studied paradigm shift, from an existential viewpoint – based on one practical method in ecopsychology: Joana Macy's *Work That Reconnects* (Macy and Brown 2014). This will lead me to argue in favor of further dialogue between ecopsychology and degrowth in order to help facilitate the transition to a more sustainable Western civilization.

1. Defining paradigms

The Dominant Social Paradigm: Support for anthropocentric concerns

Expanding the epistemological definition of a paradigm (Kuhn 1970) into the socio-cultural domain, the sociologist Denis Pirages and the biologist Paul Ehrlich defined the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) as "the prominent worldview, model, or frame of reference through which individuals or collectively, a society, interpret the meaning of the external world" (Pirages and Ehrlich, 1974: 43). These authors constructed a tool to measure adherence to the DSP, combining three related dimensions:

- The political dimension refers to positions in favor of limited governmental regulation, the support of private property, and a defense of economic individualism
- The economic dimension refers to the support of the freedom of private enterprise, the promotion of the free market, and faith in the possibility of unlimited economic growth
- The technological dimension refers to the belief that technology and science are capable of solving the majority of human problems, including environmental ones

According to Catton and Dunlap (1980), the Western worldview that underlies the DSP is based on four main beliefs: a fundamental difference between humans and other beings on earth, and the general domination of humans on the latter; the view that individuals are the masters of their own fate; the view that the world is vast and offers humans unlimited opportunities; and the idea that human history is one of infinite progress because each problem has a solution. In connection with these views, three main values are identified: economic growth, the vision of nature as a stock of resources available to humans, and the domination of humans over nature (Cotgrove and Duff 1981).

The DSP embodies a norm of what human interactions with nature should look like. Underlying them are specific beliefs on what is a human being, what is nature, and what value can be assigned to both. In the DSP, these relationships refer to the category of "Mastery over nature" as proposed by De Groot and her colleagues (2011). This category describes a relationship based on human superiority over nature, a superior moral evaluation of humans compared to nature, and the right of humans to transform and exploit nature. Therefore, in the DSP, only instrumental values are assigned to nature and its non-human entities, and humans are considered to be exempt from natural constraints – in other words, "human exemptionalism" (Dunlap and Catton 1994). This particular vision of the human involves the specific ethical position of "anthropocentrism," as understood by environmental ethics (Hess 2013).

The New Ecological Paradigm: Towards biospheric concerns

The existence of a New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) was suggested by sociologists Riley Dunlap and Kent Van Liere at the end of the 1970s (Dunlap and Van Liere 1978), in concomitance with the emergence of a new environmental sensitivity that appeared to go against the DSP. Dunlap and Van Liere created a tool to evaluate this sensitivity, based on the

items hitherto used for the DSP tool, which they supplemented with contemporary research on environmental sciences. This new tool was hardly made use of in research until the early 1990s, when global warming came onto the international stage (Dunlap 2008).

There have been three versions of the NEP since its inception in 1976. It is nowadays being used worldwide as a major tool for the evaluation of environmental concerns and has even been integrated into social-psychological models of behavior as "primitive beliefs about the Earth and human-environment relations" (Stern et al., 1995, 725). Its latest version contains fifteen items assessing five facets of an ecological worldview (Dunlap et al. 2000):

- The existence of limits to population growth on Earth and the limited quantity of natural resources available

- Anti-anthropocentrism – i.e., plants and animals have as much right as humans to exist on Earth – and the rejection of the idea that humans are made to dominate nature

- The fragility of nature's balance, with the idea that this balance is not capable of absorbing the impacts of modern industrial societies

- The rejection of the human exemptionalism, with the rejection of the idea that human ingenuity will be able to keep the Earth from becoming inhabitable, and the recognition that despite our special human abilities we remain dependent on natural laws

- The possibility that a major ecological catastrophe might occur if the situation continues unchanged, and the rejection of the idea that the extent of the ecological crisis has been exaggerated

The NEP embodies a relationship between humans and nature that closely resembles the ecocentric categories described by De Groot and her colleagues (2011), namely partnership

with nature and participation in nature. In these relationships, humans are considered as a part of nature. Furthermore, non-human natural entities are given an "intrinsic value,"[1] in other words, they are valued for their own sake and not only in an instrumental way geared towards human usefulness.

In any transition from the DSP to the NEP, there occurs an ethical transformation in the relationships between humans and nature. This entails an "identity transformation" of human beings – a transformation in the way a human being defines his or her existence, as well as his or her role, in relation to nature. The individual no longer pretends to be separate from nature but accepts that he or she is a part of nature. This transformation corresponds to the development of an *ecological identity*, defined as the way people "perceive themselves in reference to nature, as living and breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth, the biogeochemical cycles, the grand and complex diversity of ecological systems" (Thomashow 1996: xiii). This identity flourishes when the person enters a process of broadening his or her sense of self and becoming able to adopt perspectives other than his or her own. This process generally strengthens his or her concern for the ecological situation through the development of "biospheric" values (Schultz 2000).

It seems reasonable to imagine that the transformation of ethics and identity involved in a transition from the DSP to the NEP would radically transform the dynamics of the economy compared to what is its currently dominant mode of functioning. Indeed, the collective recognition of absolute ecological limits to economic growth would point towards profound changes in the dynamics of production and consumption. In actual fact, economic growth

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[1] There is a broad debate in environmental ethics on the existence of the intrinsic value of nature. As this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, readers interested in the argumentation in favor of intrinsic value are referred to the article by Peterson and Sandin (2013). For an overcoming of the instrumental-intrinsic debate, through the emerging frame of "relational values" and its links with the NEP, see the article by Klain and her colleagues (2017).

remains the main political objective of our economies (Schmelzer 2016). How can this strong inertia be understood? How could we make sense of the overwhelming adherence of most agents and decisionmakers in economies to the DSP – i.e., their faith in the possibility of continued unlimited economic growth and in the perpetuation of a relationship with nature based on the human exemptionalism? Is it just a matter of historical path dependence and of the institutional dominance of growth? My claim is that something altogether different might be at work alongside these standard mechanisms – something related to how we, as Western human beings, attempt to deal with our own limits and limitations by denying the limits of the Earth's biosphere. Accordingly, in the next section, I explore the issue of paradigm shifts through the specific lens of experimental existential psychology where issues of mortality, meaning, and identity are central.

2. The transition to the NEP: An existential exploration

Existential psychology tries to understand the worldviews, emotions, attitudes and behaviors of people confronted with the big issues of their existence (Jacobsen, 2007). The main issues include the fear of death (Feifel 1977), the search for meaning (Frankl, 1963), the issue of freedom and responsibility (Fromm, 1994), and isolation and loneliness (Pinel *et alii* 2017). Existential psychology has long been well developed in therapy (Yalom 1980) and has, over the past few decades, also seen advances in experimental studies. The existential exploration proposed in this section is based on these experimental studies. While they mainly focus on the issue of death, the other issues remain inextricably related.

At this point, it seems essential to emphasize one point. Existential psychology considers human beings from the vantage point of some rather central and universal characteristics, arguing that everybody is confronted with existential issues in their life. Nevertheless, let us keep in mind that the empirical studies presented below have been produced within modern

Western culture, and need to be considered from within that cultural context. Therefore, my subsequent use of the terms "we" and "us" refers to a simplification that focuses on a figure of the human being evolving within Western societies.

There are two main and complementary theories that explore how we bear and make do with the consciousness of our mortality in our daily life: the Terror Management Theory (TMT) and the Transcendence Management Theory (TrMT). As I will explain shortly, there are two fundamentally different tendencies at work in these two approaches. Let us designate the one described by the TMT as the "defensive tendency" and the one described by the TrMT as the "reflexive tendency." Together, understood as analyzing two faces of the same coin, they make up a "dual-existential system" (Cozzolino 2006). After presenting these two theories, I will use them to explore theoretically (*i*) the existential conditions that may influence a person's adherence to either the DSP or the NEP, and (*ii*) the transition between these two paradigms.

Terror Management Theory: A defensive existential tendency and its links with the DSP

The TMT is currently the main point of reference in experimental existential psychology. Since the 1990s, it has been investigating Ernest Becker's thesis that human beings' mostly subliminal awareness of their own mortality constitutes a profound and often unconscious driver of their behaviors (Becker 1973). According to the TMT, when confronted with this awareness we tend to repress it in order to deal with the paralyzing terror it provokes. The awareness then reverts to being "latent," which allows us to live through our daily activities, but it continues to generate some anxiety that we have to find ways of carrying. How do we do this? According to the TMT, by defending our cultural worldviews, because when we adopt their prescribed codes of interpretation and conduct, they lend us significance beyond our

physical limitations, providing a kind of symbolic immortality (Greenberg, Koole, and Pyszczynski 2004).

To test their theoretical propositions, experimental TMT researchers prime thoughts of death through a process called "mortality salience." For instance, they ask participants to picture what they think will happen to their body after death and to spell out the emotions that stem from this idea. Participants are then invited to perform tasks in order to push these thoughts of death back into latent consciousness. Investigators then evaluate the influence of this manipulation on a large set of domains. In particular, studies have found that there is an increase in financial aspirations for the future (Zaleskiewicz *et al.* 2013) and an intensification of materialistic and consumerist desires when mortality is made salient through specific questions asked to participants (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009) or by visualizing death on television (Dar-Nimrod 2012). The TMT explains these results by the fact that money and consumer goods are culturally valued objects. Their possession is therefore gratifying through the fact that it responds to dominant cultural worldviews.

Therefore, according to the TMT, when we are reminded of the idea of our own mortality, we tend to lend increased support to our own cultural worldviews (Arndt, Greenberg, and Cook 2002) and to strengthen our self-esteem based on our adherence to these worldviews (Pyszczynski *et al.* 2004). Self-esteem is thus defined as the feeling that we are "an object of primary value in a world of meaningful action" (Becker, 1973: 79). In this sense, it is possible to understand the adherence to a socioeconomic paradigm as a specific response to one's existential anxieties. Paradigms are like cultural worldviews – they offer their adherents a meaningful universe with prescriptions on how to think and act. Self-esteem tends to be reinforced among the adherents who respect these prescriptions.

The TMT also studies the influence of priming thoughts of death on our relationships with nature. Indeed, as a mirror of our own human condition and in particular as a locus of mortality

(since all that lives must decay and die), nature can have existentially frightening aspects. Within the rich literature that studies the benefits of connecting with nature to our cognitive, emotional and physical functioning (Capaldi *et al.* 2015), the TMT sheds light on a lesser-known, less frequently contemplated "dark side" of our relationships with nature. According to the TMT, under conditions of mortality salience we tend to reject our biological identity and to distance ourselves from other animals because they constitute a mirror, or at least a direct reminder, of our own mortal condition (Marino and Mountain 2015). Studies have shown that under conditions of mortality salience, participants perceive wild nature as less beautiful (Koole and Van den Berg 2005), show less concern for their natural environment because they are less motivated to protect it (Vess, Arndt, and Cox 2012; Fritsche *et al.* 2010), reject the possible identification between themselves and other human as well as non-human animals (Goldenberg *et al.* 2001), or are more supportive of the idea of killing non-human animals. This last study also shows a relationship between this reaction and a stronger feeling of power and invulnerability (Lifshin *et al.* 2017). These results support the existence of a *defensive reaction* of human beings in regard of their belonging to nature, through the – often unconscious – association between nature and death.

Earlier I listed the four main beliefs that underlie the DSP according to Catton and Dunlap (1980). Two of them lend support to a vision of nature that corresponds to the one described by TMT results – namely, a fundamental difference between humans and other beings on earth and the general domination of humans over these other beings. Based on these results, I suggest that *there is a relationship between an existential defensive tendency, as described by the TMT, and a stronger tendency to adhere to the DSP*. Indeed, we saw that under conditions of mortality salience, participants displayed a stronger attraction to materialistic and consumerist values, gave more importance to future financial enrichment, generally rejected their biological identity, and were less motivated to protect degraded natural environments – all DSP-type

attitudes and behaviors. According to the TMT, these results are explained as defense mechanisms against mortality salience. Participants tend to defend their own cultural worldviews and the self-esteem they associate with these worldviews. The reactions observed by the TMT experiments tend to reinforce the ideological foundations of the DSP and to support – at least indirectly – the dynamics of economic growth.

Transcendence Management Theory: A reflexive existential tendency and its links with the NEP

Studies in the Transcendence Management Theory (TrMT) highlight the benefits, for a more fulfilled life, of consciously reflecting on one's own death (Cozzolino 2006; Wong and Tomer 2011). In this sense, they are complementary to the TMT. In particular, the TrMT is inspired by the studies on near-death experiences and their potential for generating a post-traumatic personal growth (Noyes 1980). Experimentally, TrMT researchers tend to prime *concrete feelings* of mortality among participants – i.e., to provoke the kind of feelings near-death experiencers might experience. This process, called "death reflection," is fundamentally different from mortality salience method used in the TMT, which relies mainly on the *abstract thought* of one's mortality. Subjects are asked to read a text describing a situation where the participant is on the highest floor of a burning building. He or she realizes that he or she cannot leave the room and is "living" his or her last moments (Cozzolino 2006). The awareness of one's own mortality is here primed as concretely as possible since the person is encouraged to imagine the moment, the place, and the circumstances of his or her own death. Studies have found that this manipulation is pat to reorient the value system of participants. The ones who came in with a predominantly extrinsic orientation – i.e., whose behaviors were mainly oriented toward the search for wealth, fame, and image (Deci and Ryan 2000) – came out of the

experiment with a more intrinsic orientation (Cozzolino *et al.* 2004), i.e., with a heightened tendency to seek competence, relationships, and autonomy (Deci and Ryan 2000).

Consciously confronting the concrete sensation of one's death appears to be close to an individual disposition that is receiving increasing attention in experimental psychology – namely, *mindfulness*. This can be defined as an attitude of attention towards what one is experiencing in the present moment (Brown and Ryan 2003), and it could include the awareness of one's own mortality. Studies have found that a capacity for mindfulness reduces the defensive reactions described by the TMT (Niemiec *et al.* 2010). According to Cozzolino (2006), these two opposed tendencies in the experiencing of the consciousness of one's own death – a "defensive" tendency and a "reflexive" one – are like two sides of the same coin. They are both present at different levels, depending on the moment, our personal and social resources, and the ongoing events of our lives.

Towards an ecological identity?

Recent studies have shown that the defensive reaction against nature under conditions of mortality salience, as described by the TMT, was a function of the way participants defined themselves in relation to nature. This refers to the notion of an *ecological identity* as presented above. In other words, consciously defining oneself as an integral part of nature reduces the defensive reaction against nature under conditions of mortality salience (Fritsche and Haefner 2012). Therefore, there seems to exist a link between the fact of adopting a reflexive way of dealing with one's existential fears and the capacity to develop an ecological identity. In support of this idea, several studies have shown a correlation between a capacity for mindfulness, a stronger subjective feeling of well-being, and a stronger connection with nature (Howell *et al.* 2011; Brown and Kasser 2005). This connection is defined as a feeling of unity with nature (Mayer and Frantz 2004). Another study links nature exposure and connectedness

to subjective well-being, showing that this link is mediated by spirituality (Kamitsis and Francis 2013). This result takes its place within a broader literature that looks at the existential benefits of connecting with nature through regular exposure and the feeling of being part of something larger than oneself (Passmore and Howell 2014). As we saw previously, humans tend to transcend their death anxieties by searching for symbolic immortality (Becker, 1973). Affiliation with nature represents one possible way of attaining this kind of immortality by being reminded of the "cyclical relationships between life and death" and how "such a relationship is in fact a necessary condition for the functioning of the Earth" (Pienaar, 2011: 27). Nature is therefore perceived as what remains after we have passed away, and belonging to it or even fusing with it beyond physical death create a sense of self-perpetuation. Furthermore, some studies suggest that feeling connected to nature participates in buffering the anxieties of existential isolation (Clayton 2003; Mayer *et al.* 2009), while according to others, the disconnection between humans and nature – a disconnection specific to modern Western societies that ecopsychology views as one of the main roots of the current ecological crisis – tends to reinforce our feeling of isolation (Nelson in Kellert and Wilson 1993). Other studies link the exposure and connection to nature with the attainment of existential meaning through the questioning of one's priorities and objectives outside the "box" of what is prescribed by our dominant cultural worldviews (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Howell, Passmore, and Buro 2013).

As we saw earlier, one of the NEP's central tenets is the existence of limits to what nature is capable of giving and sustaining, demographically as well as economically. The pursuit of economic growth is seen as the source of great instability and risk for our modern societies. According to the NEP, there is a fundamental incompatibility between the protection of nature and the pursuit of economic growth. There is a recognition and an acceptance of limits – of both nature and the biosphere, and of our human capacity for expansion. In light of the existentially-based evidence just described, *I submit that the acceptance of limits required by*

the NEP cannot genuinely occur without a form of acceptance of our visceral internal limit – that is to say, our own mortality. Based on this recognition, genuinely and deeply adhering to the NEP requires of each human subject what could be called "reflexive existential work" oriented towards accepting his or her own mortality. In this sense, a transition from the DSP to the NEP appears to imply that we should seek and find new ways of bearing and dealing with our existential fears – in a reflexive instead of a defensive mode. In parallel, this would also imply that we redefine ourselves in relation to nature by developing an ecological identity. In the following, I theoretically explore some existential obstacles to, and opportunities for, this *identity transition*.

Transition towards the NEP: Existential obstacles and opportunities

If ideas of degrowth are to genuinely take root, there needs to be a collective transition from the DSP to the NEP – or, even more to the point, the NEP needs to become the "new DSP," the new dominant social paradigm within our industrial societies. How can we understand, the obstacles to, and opportunities for, the underlying identity transformation that is needed?

I explore this question through the construction of personal profiles embodying distinct stages in the transition to the NEP. These profiles will be presented as ideal types, which must be considered as theoretical propositions constructed on the basis of the literature presented previously. These ideal types may be explored empirically in potential future works.

Different positions need to be considered with respect to a person's "navigation" between the DSP and the NEP. There is, first of all, what we have been discussing in earlier sections – namely, an adherence to the two opposite polarities of the DSP and the NEP with their related existential tendencies: defensive or reflexive (which also refer to two opposite polarities). Interestingly, there is also a median or "transitional" position between these opposites. It

corresponds to a person's adherence to so-called "Ecological Modernization" (EM) and the support for green growth (Christoff 1996; Hayden 2014). EM is defined here as a political discourse which publicly affirms certain specific objectives – among which, principally, the decoupling of economic growth from material and energy inputs as well as polluting outputs, and the improvement of eco-efficiency and lower-impact technologies, supported mostly by market-oriented policies. These objectives assume the possibility of a long-run compatibility between economic growth and the protection of nature; in this sense, they would *appear* to combine aspects of the DSP (promotion of growth) and of the NEP (promotion of conservation).

However, I hypothesize presently that this is an illusory balance, which corresponds to a "transitional" state in which the individual is adopting some of the reflexive words of the NEP while remaining established in the defensive *practices and worldview* of the DSP. According to Christoff (1996), "EM is essentially a political strategy to try to accommodate the environmentalist critique of the 1970s on with the 1980s deregulatory neo-liberal climate. It is capitalism ostensibly with a greener aspect – and as such it avoids addressing basic contradictions in capitalism" (in Pepper 1998: 3). So EM may be seen, in essence, as a point of passage in the transition from the DSP and the NEP – one in which a person can remain "stuck" for a time (or for their whole life), even though they may feel they have largely espoused the NEP, as long as the *actual, concrete implications of degrowth* are still triggering their defensive way of coping with their existential fears. They abstractly adhere to the NEP, but they cannot overcome certain deep-seated obstacles to actually developing as reflexive ecological identity – and so they attempt to harmonize their environmental concerns with a defensive promotion of "green" growth and capitalism.

Table 1 schematizes the dynamics of this more complex identity transition argument. The different positions I explore are numbered as follows:

1. Adherence to the DSP as a defensive existential response

2. Adherence to the NEP as a reflexive existential response

3. The middle column shows intermediary positions between adherence to the DSP and adherence to the NEP through an adherence to EM.

Moreover, I hypothesize that adherence to EM could correspond to two very different existential responses:

o *Defensive tendency* (box 3a): In this case the adherence operates in an unconscious way without any critical distance. There is a very low to low level of identity integration and what still dominates are the extrinsic values and objectives of the DSP's worldview. The person adheres to a very "pro-growth" and "low-ecology" version of EM, which can also be characterized as *shallow ecological modernization*.

o *"Proto-reflexive" tendency* (box 3b): In this case reflection has occurred concerning the biosphere's limits and the intrinsic value of nature, so that one can speak of *deep ecological modernization*. However, the response to support and buffer the fears generated remains one of (subtler but all the more powerful) denial. In other words, while having begun to realize the existence of ecological limits, the subject still protects him- or herself against this idea by espousing the "magical" belief that these limits are somehow not "really" a constraint, and never will be, because human ingenuity, technology, innovation, and market strategies will forever make it possible for humans to live "as if" the biosphere's limits could be overlooked, thanks to endlessly eco-efficient growth. This paradoxical attitude is a form of non-fully internalized reflexivity

– or what I call "proto-reflexivity" – concerning the reality of our limitations. Existential fears still trump ecological identity, albeit in a manner that can be much harder to detect.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

The pseudo-acceptance of biospheric limits in EM appears insufficient, by itself, to abandon the growth imperative. This means that to finally move out of EM(3b) into the NEP, it would be necessary to find ways to deal with existential fears that are both reflexive *and* in line with the full acceptance of active ecological limits, so as to become capable of profoundly modifying our own lifestyles and of participating in the deeper reform of our economy towards degrowth. The arrow in table 1 refers to this path of transformation towards what I call a *fully reflexive, eco-existential tendency*, which could bring to a collective adherence to the NEP supported by a profound abandonment of the fear-based need to deny biosphere's limits.

For the transition to this new tendency to occur, it seems necessary at an individual level to carry out the inner work of "making peace" with the awareness of our own mortality. How do we do this? In our daily life, we can consciously decide to reflect on the way we routinely bear and deal with our existential issues. It is entirely possible to cultivate an attitude of attention related to the capacity for mindfulness discussed earlier. One salient way of cultivating this attitude is to reconnect more deeply with nature – since nature, of which we are in fact an integral part, may constitute a mirror of our own mortal condition. This is the avenue I will explore in the next and last section, making use of the "Work that Reconnects", one of ecopsychology's applications.

3. Plural dialogue and policy implications: The potential of a reflexive ecopsychology

The "Work that Reconnects" (WTR), developed by Joanna Macy, is one among several practical methods applying ecopsychology, but arguably one of the most popular and

widespread ones. The WTR offers a workshop format for personal and collective change through an experiential group process (Macy and Brown 2014). The process aims to help individuals experience their connections with each other and the entire web of life – in other words, all the other human and non-human beings around the world. The WTR framework suggests a variety of intellectual, physical and emotional exercises constructed around four distinct but interrelated phases which form what Macy calls the "Spiral of the WTR," as depicted in the figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

Through these four phases, participants are led to release their emotional blockages and denial concerning ecological degradation, and to transform these emotions into motivated and constructive actions towards sustainability (Hollis-Walker 2012). This process aims to transform subjects' worldviews and their relationship with nature and to make them feel their connection with all the other human and non-human entities. For example, participants are invited to adopt the perspective of other non-human beings or entities, and to speak "from their voices" during an exercise called "The Council of All Beings". Through this exercise, subjects can imagine what these other entities are experiencing and how they are affected by the current ecological situation. This "empathizing" with non-human nature is a possible avenue towards participants' developing biospheric concerns (Schultz 2000).

The WTR could be a powerful tool to support the transition towards the NEP through the process of identity and worldview transformation it is designed to set into motion. It is also a powerful method to reflect on the more existentially disquieting aspects of nature that the TMT has shown in its studies. At the same time, the WTR process could contribute to buffering the anxieties of the existential issues of death, isolation, meaning, and freedom, as seen in the previous section. Therefore, my hypothesis from an existential vantage point is that our Western reconnection with nature goes hand in hand with the processing of our own existential

fears. To the extent we are seeking *truly new* nature-society relationships so that degrowth can take root deeply and spread widely, the contributions of a *reflexive ecopsychology* such as the one I have delineated here might well be crucial. This might constitute an important tool to encourage the inner existential work we discussed earlier, in order to develop the *fully reflexive eco-existential tendency* that seems needed, as hypothesized, for a transition out of the Dominant Social Paradigm and the "limbo" of Ecological Modernization and into the New Ecological Paradigm.

To synthesize, a *reflexive ecopsychology* supports the path to degrowth in two main ways. First, it responds to the voluntary and democratic aspects at the core of the degrowth concept (Asara et al., 2013). Applied in civil groups, schools or companies, the WTR framework would lead to peaceful transformations at a wider societal level. Furthermore, the WTR also activates empathy among participants – empathy for all human and non-human groups at the heart of hierarchical power dominance (see Salleh, Fritz and Koller in this issue) – thus shedding light on the fundamental interconnectedness of all beings around the world. Second, given the necessity of a process of downscaling of the wealthiest economies in order to reach a global steady-state economy (Research and Degrowth, 2010), the WTR workshops could constitute a precious psychological tool for politics to accompany Western societies in meeting their basic human needs despite new, lower-consumption ways of life that will surely impact subjective well-being in the short term (Koch et al., 2017).

Conversely, ecopsychology should do a better job at mobilizing the rich exploration, within degrowth, of the changes needed at a more collective and institutional level. Failure to do this appears to be one of the main "blind spots" of contemporary ecopsychology (Kanner, 2014), even though it was originally one of its core objectives (Fisher, 1996). Globally, a more engaged, multi-level dialogue between ecopsychology and degrowth would undoubtedly

reinforce their shared objective of transforming Western societies towards a more sustainable trajectory.

A new dialogue between these two disciplines could foster the evolution of Western human beings towards more self-reflection on their values, beliefs, and behaviors in relation to nature, as well as on the economic and political organizations in which they take part every day.
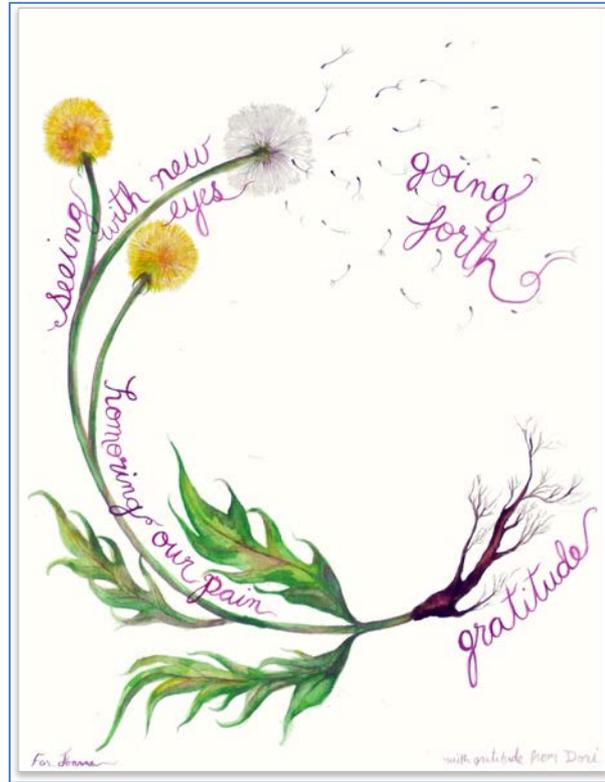
Tables and figures

Figure 1 – The Spiral of the WTR, by Dori Midnight (from https://www.joannamacy. net/main)

	Dominant social paradigm (DSP)	*Ecological modernization (EM)*	New ecological paradigm (NEP)
Defensive existential tendency (TMT)	YES (1)	YES (3a)	NO
Proto-reflexive existential tendency (TrMT)	NO	YES (3b)	NO
Fully reflexive eco-existential tendency	NO	NO	YES (2)

Table 1 – Existential transition towards the NEP

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