
Eco-Philosophy of Fearism
and Ecocriticism: In an Age of Terror



R. Michael Fisher

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Technical Paper No. 68

In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute

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Abstract – This is the 3rd technical paper in a five part series on “ecocriticism” as it relates to the author’s work on fear and fearlessness. Technical Paper No. 68 addresses both his focused engagement with Desh Subba’s philosophy of fearism in the last three years, and with his attempting to link Subba’s notion of “fearism” and the “fearist perspective” (lens) with ecocriticism (especially, Estok’s view). The synthesis is one that has led the author to propose herein a very basic description and outline of what is a new branch of thought called *Eco-Philosophy of fearism*.

Introduction: A Trigger Warning and Beyond

Desh Subba,¹ philosopher, poet, writer and founder of Philosophy of Fearism recently responded positively (pers. comm., Nov. 10, 2017) to my idea of a new branch called *Eco-Philosophy of Fearism*, which would address the current context of an “Age of Terror,” especially in light of all the recent ecological and environmental crises being felt by everyone on the planet:

Eco-Philosophy of fearism is a new topic for Eco-critics. It enriches the field of criticism. I agree with eco-criticism. It can be suitable on the frame of Post Modernism or, Post-post Modernism; it is under-discoursed so far. However, our world must study it. It is time for *Eco-Philosophy of Fearism*. Sooner or later we must do it. We have a fear of global warming, pollution, increase of mass destruction weapons. These are source of *many-Philosophy of Fearism*. Everyone needs to do specialization. We are waiting how new scholars grab it. Thank you for sharing the new Technical Paper No. 66, Mr. Michael. I hope we can get copies out soon.²

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desh_Subba

² See <https://fearlessnessmovement.ning.com/blog/ecocriticism-ecophobia-and-the-eco-fear-problem-a-new-technical-p?commentId=6662424%3AComment%3A10203>

As this is the third technical paper in a five part series, I would encourage readers to examine Technical Paper No. 66 and No. 67 before launching into this one. It has long come to me that “We [humanity] have a fear of global warming, pollution, increase of mass destruction weapons,” as Subba remarked above in the quote. In Technical Paper No. 66 David Sobel one of the ecocritics has called this growing fear a type of disorder he labeled “ecophobia.” I argued, using Simon Estok’s ecocriticism of ecocriticism (and of Sobel’s position) that ecophobia could be cast in a much larger historical, cultural, political and philosophical context than what Sobel has done. I also argued that it is best to look at the Eco-Fear Problem globally and to examine how Subba’s Philosophy of Fearism may also be complementary to the eco-critiques. My point is, that Subba’s identification of the eco-fear issues of today is an acknowledgement to take heed, yet, we have to theorize beyond merely attending to the various eco-fears as he lists and Sobel warned about.

I mention “trigger warning” in the Introduction subtitle because we have to acknowledge both that people have *fears* that they will at times talk about with others; and, that people have a fear of talking about fears—because they have a fear of fear itself. The very word “fear” can bring up fear. The very word “terror” can bring up fear and/or terror too. This is like a post-traumatic reaction to a powerful threatening stimuli—at least, if the words are interpreted as such. This *fear of fear* (what psychiatrists may call “phobophobia”) is a concern of several Western thinkers and modern critics but also going back throughout time from Francis Bacon to Montaigne and to Thoreau.³ For example, more recently, former Pres. of the USA, F. D. Roosevelt’s famous quote in 1931 warned of this. The political historian, Corey Robin, and other contemporary social theorists have documented this in the history of the modern Western world.⁴

These critics believe such a condition is something unique in history and very debilitating above and beyond the everyday negative effects that fear(s) may have emotionally and individually. The Fear Problem is compounded by this complex phenomenon self-reifying fear of fear itself; and then add in the “culture of fear” (and post-9/11) context for our way of life (see Technical Paper No. 67) and things get even more complex in what

³ See Church, F. (2004). *Freedom from fear: Finding the courage to act, love, and be*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 4.

⁴ See Robin, C. (2004). *Fear: The political history of an idea*. New York: Oxford University Press. See also, for e.g., Furedi, F. (2006). *Culture of fear revisited: Risk-taking and the morality of low expectation*. London, UK: Continuum.

‘fear’ (fear) people are having to manage somehow, often without a good education and training to understand what they are facing.

It is an ethical problem in doing this fearwork of which Robert Sardello and myself have partially investigated.⁵ Sardello wrote, “One of the greatest challenges in [teaching] writing about fear is to avoid generating more fear by doing so.”⁶ My work, ecocriticism and any proposed Eco-Philosophy of Fearism, ought to pay heed to this triggering problem. But I am not sure just warning people with a phrase “trigger warning” and/or “this material to follow may bring up fear” etc. is going to help the situation. There are some reasons trigger warnings may be useful but they also need to be critiqued. My main concern is that they will merely reinforce “fear of fear itself.” People will keep avoiding fear(s), in an ever-endless search for safety and security that may in fact not really be ‘real’ (certainly, this is diminishing in an Age of Terror).

The whole point of my work and Subba’s is to be emancipatory—helping all to move from Fear to Fearlessness. I believe that is the same, more or less, with Estok’s version of ecocriticism and his unveiling of the “Ecophobia Hypothesis.” It is not that I have any easy answers here to this ethical problem Sardello raised nearly two decades ago when teaching, writing and theorizing about fear. Neither Subba nor Estok, as far as I know have addressed this ethical dilemma but no one else has either in recent times. I have raised it in my work many years ago and do so again to at least bring awareness to the potential harm and, perhaps worse, is to bring awareness that I may be reproducing the very thing I am criticizing and that is the “culture of fear” itself—which, as I defined it is built on the architecture of ‘poor’ quality (non-critical) fear management/education, whereby *culture of fear* is defined by me as *trying to manage fear by fear-based means and creating more fear not less*. I have however made theoretical achievements, or perhaps it is only philosophical proposition, that *When fear arises, so there shall fearlessness* be in order to counter fear’s limitations (and potential damages).⁷ I’ll return to my dictum shortly. This concern of reproducing the very thing we critique, is somewhat similar to

⁵ See Sardello, R. (1999). *Freeing the soul from fear*. New York: Putnam Penguin; see also Fisher, (2016), pp. 99-100. Fisher, R. M. (2016). Towards a theory of fearism. In R. M. Fisher & D. Subba (2016), *Philosophy of fearism: An East-West dialogue* (pp. 97-128). Australia: Xlibris.

⁶ Sardello, p. xvi.

⁷ Form more discussion on this see Fisher (2016), pp. 99-100.

what Estok raises in re: to ecophobia dynamics in much of eco-media and ecocriticism generally.⁸

Subbaian and Estokian Parallels: Context of “Ages”

Momentous events have a way of connecting individuals both to history and to one another. So it was on September 11 [2001].... What they’d [students at Yale University] witnessed, many of them said, cried out for context....People everywhere would have to get used to being afraid in ways and to a degree that they had never known before....the USA had entered an age of terror.⁹

There were no (obvious) “trigger warnings” for that auspicious tragedy of 9/11. There was little wise counsel provided by political leaders in the USA. The spiral of fear, terror and hate drove many into vicious wars that could not be won—that is, the unending “War on Terror.”

I don’t wish to talk about post-9/11 era as context *per se* for ecocriticism, it is always there in my work and Estok’s. I wish to keep focus on my dictum: *When fear arises, so there shall fearlessness be*. After 9/11 the spirit of fearlessness was there, theoretically, but nearly all of Americans (especially) weren’t paying attention to it. They were hypnotized in Fear—paying attention to ‘fear’ as constructed culturally and politically and commodified by media and business—and, just about everyone else. But that is another story. The ethical warming of Sardello and myself is valid to re-position haste and drama and any critical rehashing the historical trauma of 9/11 or any other momentous event. The last thing I want to do in this Technical Paper is to “hype” and “sell” and “steal” attention from anyone—just by using “Age of Terror.” Let me explain my rationale.

You’ve been warned. With that cautionary, now we can turn to the context of this work—which is one, I believe, that can be very useful—that is, the context of living, teaching, learning, healing and liberating in “Age of Terror.” I was reminded recently of the importance of context in reading Estok

⁸ Estok, S. C. (2016). Ecomedia and ecophobia. *Neohelicon*, 43, 127-45.

⁹ Chanda, N., & Talbott, S. (2001). Introduction. In S. Talbott and N. Chanda (Eds.), *The age of terror: America and the world after September 11* (pp. viii-xix). New York: Basic Books, pp. viii, ix, xiv.

(2013). He contextualized ecocriticism in “an Age of Terror.”¹⁰ Estok’s mission is to ensure theory and academia in general, as well as literary criticism, come out of the ‘ivory tower’ and engage the public experience on the streets, to encounter and resist “palpable danger” and “sudden presence of terror (fear) in the lives of people in fully industrialized nations. We have entered an Age of Terror,”¹¹ he wrote. And he doesn’t mean political and legally definable “terrorism,” though he includes that in his Age of Terror conception. I recommend people read his insightful and courageous paper where he puts “fear” into the foreground of literary criticism (and ecocriticism). Let’s turn now to how this labeling of a meta-context of an “Age” (cf. with Anthropocene Era), with this affective register of “Terror” (i.e., extreme fear), can be potentially useful. I find a somewhat similar parallel in Subba’s and my own work.

For instance, Subba (2014) goes much further in his pivotal text on *Philosophy of Fearism* than to merely discuss “fears” but is rather (like myself) much more interested in *fear itself* and its motivational force in shaping human societies, cultures, and virtually everything we do as a species. Subba prefers the term “*fearism*” as the larger domain of experience related to fear-human relations in an analogous (but different) conceptualization as “existentialism” or “Marxism,” and so on.¹² Although a much ‘milder’ literary critic than Estok (or myself), Subba (a native of Nepal, now living in Hong Kong) sets out his own context for a re-visioning of philosophy and literary production and criticism in the 21st century. He does this by several means, far beyond what I can do justice to in this short paper. I suggest you study what he means by the “*fearist perspective*”¹³ (lens) he puts on evolu-

¹⁰ Estok, S. C. (2013). Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror. *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 15(1), 1-9.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² See Fisher, R. M., & Subba, D. (2016). Why a new Philosophy of Fearism now? Unpublished paper.

¹³ “*Fearist*- in rare use, it refers to one who practices a fearist perspective and contributes to and follows the philosophy of fearism; in popular culture the term is commonly used in a derogatory sense to label those who are engaged in fear-mongering and/or who see the world through a fear-based lens.” “*Fearist perspective* [coined by Subba]- a generic orientation which refers to a complex set of perceptions, concepts, and the actual ‘lens’ by which a Subbaian fearist sees the world as conducted and shaped by fear, pivotal to everyday life; derives its foundational knowledge from its integration with a philosophy of fearism and/or fearology” (Fisher & Subba, 2016, p. 157).

tion, history and philosophy, and of which he and I wrote of in application to “third world” development¹⁴ and to “terrorism” itself.¹⁵

One thing that really attracted me in late 2014 to his unique work on fear (his major book¹⁶) was his universal theory of some eight Ages of Fear in human history of which the current one is the “Extreme Fear” age and if we make it through that we will enter globally the “Fearless Age.”¹⁷ This “Extreme Age” of Fear is analogous to “Age of Terror” in my view. Subba, independent of my own theorizing, validates that when there is extreme fear (i.e., terror) of great intensity and proportion chronically, it creates its own opposite energetic and movement (like my dictum suggests) and “Fearless” will be the response to “Terror.”¹⁸ Note, Estok has no such theorizing beyond his contextualization of the “Age of Terror” and typically no one else does either who has named that this age likewise. Again, it is beyond the scope of this series of papers to engage this in more detail and the systems theory that is behind it.

I am thus generally critical of the use of “Age of Terror” (even for the eco-criticism perspective) if and only if there is no offering of the emergence of a latent, healing, and/or counterhegemonic Age (e.g., Subba’s “Fearless Age”). I don’t believe this offering is fantasy, hope-mongering romanticism or delusion that is fear-based itself because of some neurotic “defense mechanism” or despair to “exit” the world as it is. However, only time and “testing” will verify Subba’s and/or my dialectical philosophical position (i.e., Terror/ Fearless in dialectical relations—evolving dynamically as fear management systems intelligence). The opposite movement of resistance and/or system-regulation is based, in part, on empirically-sound living systems theory work, which appealed to me in my early 20s-30s and which I find equally supported in Ken Wilber’s integral philosophy and critical theory (see Technical Paper No. 67). I want the counterhegemonic brought

¹⁴ Fisher, R. M., and Subba, R. (2016). The true gift of education for development: A fearist perspective. *Participation: A Nepalese Journal of Participatory Development*, 17 (August), 23-29.

¹⁵ Fisher, R. M., & Subba, D. (2016). Terrorism: A guide to fearful times based on a philosophy of fearism. Technical Paper No. 57. Carbondale, IL: In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute.

¹⁶ Subba, D. (2014). *Philosophy of fearism: Life is conducted, directed and controlled by the fear*. Australia: Xlibris.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 14, 36, 46.

¹⁸ For e.g., see Fisher, R. M. (2010). *The world’s fearlessness teachings: A critical integral approach to fear management/education for the 21st century*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, pp. 190-91, 251.

forth with the “Age of Terror” label. That is, because my mission is emancipatory and I refuse to fall into dramatic hyperbolic (media-framed) speculations about an “Age of Terror” like so many do, without the offering of and realization of an equally and simultaneous movement in the opposite direction. A similar analogous critique has been made very well by the communications critic Fiona Jeffries (and a few others)¹⁹ in several papers recently, as she critiques the critics of the “culture of fear” (and/or “culture of terror”), whom she argues contextualize the entire domain of *culture* as if there is only victimization and dystopia going on; and, by contrast she argues they commit nearly all their thinking, writing and teaching to documenting and analyzing the problem with little solutions offered—that is, “resistance.” Again, this is Etok’s notion of complicity by the critics themselves in what they are critiquing. I believe the theory of the historical Fearlessness Movement (and my dictum above) speak to this Jeffriesian critique and offer an emancipatory complementary route. I see this also in Subba’s work and in part in Estok’s work. This all requires much more future analysis for better clarity and theorizing.

Subba’s Ecocriticism: Forging Eco-Philosophy of Fearism

With the theme of the five technical papers on “ecocriticism,” it behooves this inquiry to assess how has Subba’s original work (and his followers) taken up the “eco” theme(?). A quick scan of Subba’s *Philosophy of Fearism* indicates that he gives some attention to ecological and environmental issues of the day but it is not extensive.²⁰ From an ecophobic critique, it seems Subba’s philosophy of fearism, much like existentialism or pragmatism in certain ways, depicts a view of humans and nature in a cycle of interrelations that are more or less reducible to “survival” (i.e., survival fears). This is Subba’s basic articulation of the human condition (and, potentially, the foundational driver of human nature) in his philosophy. His logic of “a fear circle” proceeds, as he wrote:

¹⁹ See Jeffries, F. (2012). Mediating fear. *Global Media and Communications*, 9(1), 37-52; Jeffries, F. (2013). Fear disarmed. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 12, 332-39; Jeffries, F. (2015). *Nothing to lose but our fear: Resistance in dangerous times*. Toronto, ON: Between the Lines; Margold, J. A. (1999). From ‘cultures of fear and terror’ to the normalization of violence. *Critique of Anthropology*, 19(1), 63-88.

²⁰ He has some seven pages of text where “ecology” is mentioned and several pages where “environment” is highlighted, e.g., pollution and impacts of wars on environments culturally, politically, emotionally, etc.

Man's [sic] fears that if he doesn't get food to eat, he will die. He then decides to take [i.e., s/he sacrifices] the life of an animal or plant for his [sic] livelihood. Life is possible only with food. He fears that the extinction of animals and plants surely brings extinction of human beings. We make our attempts [as a species] for the preservation of these animals and plants for our food. It continuously revolves. It is a fear circle.²¹

We see here Subba utilizing, consciously or not, a basic Maslowian hierarchy of needs perspective on human motivation and development of consciousness. This 'lower' consciousness is important as primal and suitable for basic need fulfillment—that is, "survival" based on food as foundational to all other human needs (other than, oxygen to breath etc.). The ecocritic in me is curious how Subba constructs a theory of Nature here. It seems Nature is constructed as a resource. It is as if Subba has no other imaginary for Nature other than as seen through the human lens. It also looks as if Nature cannot be perceived (imagined) by humans other than this one way. I am not sure if that is true to the Nature of Subba's philosophy and cosmology, however, in this brief quote it is illustrative of what I would call a typical humanistic discourse formation and centralization of "human needs" as the way to understand human motivation alone. I think this, like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, are both very problematic models and more and more they have been criticized. Yet, that's a tangential topic to my interest in developing an eco-philosophy of fearism.

So, I would take the basic Subbaian notion of the philosophy of fearism (*via*, the fearist perspective) as having some good partial truths about the human and Nature interface. Subba ignores a theory of "desire" for example, both in humans and in Nature, and rather focuses on "need" and concomitantly fear. Now, to be clear, Subba is not theorizing "fear" as bad or wrong or pathological at all. His "fear circle" is his attempt to show the way fear is *natural* in fact to the very functioning of living systems (at least, the human systems). This is the focus on *fear* that makes *Subbaian fearism* unique today. I include some of his views and pursue my own *Fisherian fearism*.²² I do not intend to argue for or against his position here, but only to say that it is partial and somewhat inadequate for many reasons, and that others, of existential persuasion, also have said some similar things in the history of philosophy and trying to define human nature and the human condition. What stands out as I read his passages on "eco-

²¹ Subba (2014), p. 111.

²² For e.g., see Fisher & Subba (2016); especially, our differences in the Table on p. 37.

logical” for example, there is still a sense of the humanistic perspective dominating, and he cannot seem to find another perspective (e.g., ecological perspective itself, and/or an Indigenous perspective). Thus, his humanistic orientation will still “objectify” both Nature (perhaps humans) as “objects” to which a perceiver (“Man”) will respond to.²³ This has various ontological problematics when in the context of current advances in evolutionary and ecological critical thinking (e.g., enactivism theory²⁴)—the latter, are much more co-relational, co-conscious²⁵ and multi-perspectival in terms of the human and Nature relationship dynamic. And, yes, this is all important to take into account when we come to articulate a philosophy of fearism where the unit of analysis is Human-Nature-Fear (*aka* Eco-Fear Problem).

It appears to me that Subba’s literary, humanistic, psychological and general humanities orientation is his strength in articulating a philosophy of fear(ism). I applaud how his logical philosophy flows from a very sincere and in depth understanding of reality. His fearist perspective is unique to him as well and his rural and pragmatic approach to life is based on his experience. His poetical sensibility as an artist-fiction writer also colors his philosophy and thought, his imagination, his writing and teaching. However, his weakness (other than his often poor English translations of his original Nepalese language he uses as mother-tongue) is lack of education in the leading-edge theories in biology, evolutionary sciences and ecological theorizing including ecocriticism. That is why I am proposing to bolster the thinking of philosophy of fearism in general by this new move to include a

²³ An example I find of this individualism, cognitivism, objectifying (Cartesian-like discourse): “Fear is an experience of reactions produced by the objects constituted....It depends on the individual. Every individual differs... in terms of perception, listening, understanding, adaptability, and tolerance. As a result, the world as thought by a man [sic]; environment, and nature are also different. So an object has a number of interpretations...” (Subba, 2014, p. 52). At the same time, I find Subba sometimes thinks and philosophizes quite differently than this position (although, he still seems to operate within a “philosophy of mind” paradigm)—for, e.g., his foregrounding of the important role of consciousness, he wrote, “All fears are not equal; they depend on the level of consciousness” (p. 51). However, the place where Subba and I have not had enough conversation is on just how do we classify and identify and grow into these so-called “levels” of consciousness (I tend to follow the Wilberian spectrum of consciousness theory and Desh does not).

²⁴ See for e.g., <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enactivism>

²⁵ I borrow this term from the ecophilosopher Four Arrows (*aka* Don Trent Jacobs) and his theorizing on human and Nature co-arising consciousness and/or participative consciousness, etc., all of which transcend the problems of the Cartesian philosophy of separate perceiver (mind) and perceived (objects that the mind encounters)—see Technical Paper 70 on this Indigenous-based perspective on the Eco-Fear Problem.

new branch called *eco-philosophy of fearism* that better engages and integrates these new theories I just mentioned. Subba himself is very supportive of this growth.

Some Initial Recommendations

My basic recommendation for initial eco-philosophy of fearism is to study closely Subba's work, especially as he talks about ecology, the ecological, environment and environmentalism. I have not yet studied all of what he has to offer in this regard. I think his largely Eastern worldview/cultural perspective is very valuable to put into dialogue with the more Western views (my own included). I would also suggest that from an ecocriticism point of view, more links be drawn between Estok and Subba where possible and that attention be given to their contextualizing of the "Age of Terror" we are now living. Also, they each may critique each other.

When I take Subba's claim above (excerpt): *We make our attempts [as a species] for the preservation of these animals and plants for our food.* It is logical in his claim therefore that the human beings are only going to be motivated (foundationally, hierarchically in the Maslowian sense) to preserve Nature because of our fear of dying, fear of no food, etc. I recommend this be critiqued by eco-philosophy of fearism. It is too reductionistic, not holistic-integral and it sets up the ecophobia patterning, the very thing that Estok has been attempting to critique and deconstruct as problematic. Again, this would all require a much longer argumentation to be adequate to do justice to their positions, and seeming oppositions.

Subba's own ecocriticism (albeit, not very developed) does offer a basis for considering the Eco-Fear Problem, especially when he wrote of the following two issues of great concern to him and to humanity (when they are not in fear and denial of the reality of eco-crises):

All the wild animals, plants, and the community, language, script, religion, culture, etc. are disappearing from this world....[it has] deep [negative] impacts on human beings.²⁶

This is a rather dystopic sounding narrative, though it is not what the philosophy of fearism is intending or based on, rather it is a pragmatic

²⁶ Ibid., p. 240.

and rather optimistic philosophy as both Subba and I have agreed. Yet, we also have to face the hard facts and fearful scenarios of what is unfolding in an Age of Terror, the Anthropocene context, the culture of fear. From the eco-side of this bleak looking future, Subba follows up on his eco-criticism view and notes that unfortunately, most humans are so busy with their own self-survival needs in concrete terms of short-term survival, that they cannot “think about ecology and environmental depletion” (on systems and global scale).²⁷ Subba concludes his discussion with saying the communication from the world will come back to the “man” [sic] and s/he will fear ecological depletion but then dialectically that will motivate them to do something positive (supposedly) about the eco-problem. So, in this Sobelian narrative of ecocriticism, the ecophobia (i.e., fear of ecological depletion) leads (as a positive force) automatically to an attempt of correction and renewal and better practices to preserve Nature.²⁸ Fear in this philosophy is thus always helpful, although Subba knows in extremes it can prevent the positive side from correcting the problem in accurate ways and in a timely fashion.

What I see is an implicit recommendation here by Subba that eco-philosophy of all kinds takes into regard the “fear circle” he has theorized in a logical manner. This offers an optimistic philosophy that never sees or experiences “fear” (ideally) as bad or wrong. Ethically, Subba points to an eco-philosophy in these passages (and perhaps others I have not yet examined)—and, he would be first to say that as humans improve their own philosophy of fearism (i.e., fear management/education) they will be less “worrying” (neurotic) and more acting with agency towards correcting the terrifying things going on in their environment and inside themselves; less fear of fear. Their health will be motivated by fear(ism). I for one, appreciate Subba’s challenge to think very differently than we usually do, where we are trying to avoid fear when it is inevitably (theoretically) leading us to change and transform for the better. Of course, the ethical challenge is to determine when the fear is healthy doing this guiding and shaping and when it is pathological (e.g., ‘fear’), the latter which may or may not conform to Subba’s initial propositions about the dialectical nature and role of fear.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 112.