

How have ideas about nature shaped the histories and legacies of colonialism?

This essay will explore dichotomous thinking in Western philosophy that is incompatible with Indigenous philosophies, how this dichotomous cultural thought is a progenitor of Western conceptions of Nature that are incompatible with Indigenous concepts of Nature, the anthropocentric ideals calqued from Judeo-Christian doctrines, the consequences of these anthropocentric ideals in regard to reductionism and essentialism within Western historiography and ethnography, and will also use the prior analysis as a vessel to explore how these Western ideas of Nature have shaped the histories and legacies of colonialism. I'd first like to start by defining 'Western' as not indicative of a geographical entity; the term 'Western' is descriptive of nations with legacies of colonialism that have historically drawn influence from Greco-Roman conquest and Christian philosophy.

Dichotomous thinking has shaped Western epistemology for millenia, and had been firmly established as a fundamental Western cultural tradition by the time of colonial exploration. Dichotomous thinking tolerated zero inconsistencies and was therefore seen as more productive compared to the cognitive dissonance and naiveties associated with dialectical thought. Because of this heightened productivity, dichotomous thinking catalysed the crystallisation of logic as a discipline dedicated to good reasoning. The dominance of reason in early modern philosophy contributed significantly to the emergence of dualistic thinking, especially by separating mind and body, showing how reason and dichotomy were in equilibrium with each other. This idea that a human is made up of two components (the immaterial and the material) is known as bipartite anthropology. Bipartite anthropology in the West had been an established tradition since Aristotle's Conception of Matter. The goal of improvement or 'betterment' was the motivation of the Greek's civilising endeavours according to Aristotle: "...for some presumed Good is the end of all action..." (Aristotle 350:1) More so, he considers it part of the "natural" order that man achieve good for himself, his family and state, through acquisition—from nature: "Of the art of acquisition then there is one kind which by nature is a part of the management of a household, in so far as the art of household management must either find ready to hand, or itself provide, such things necessary to life, and useful for the community of the family or state, as can be stored" (Aristotle 350:3). However, the most infamous declaration of bipartite anthropology stems from Eastern tradition in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 2;7). The consolidation of bipartite anthropology as a universally accepted doctrine was only exacerbated by the introduction of Judeo-Christian doctrine within the West. The Hebrew Bible infused established notions of bipartite anthropology with radical ideas of anthropocentrism, suggesting that humans were the most valuable of God's creation due to being given 'dominion' over the earth (Genesis 1:26 - 28). By having Adam name all of the animals, the very identity and

character of non-human life is being defined in human terms, within the human psyche, and in the human mode of discourse. These verses have been interpreted by many exegetes to suggest that humans have the right to alter, manipulate and exploit nature for their own ends. Therefore, the popular definition of nature today is that which has not been shaped or manipulated by Man; this sets up a clear dichotomy between Man and Nature.

Within the Enlightenment period, there was a paradigmatic tradition of anthropocentrism. There was a reaffirmation of the uniquely human malleability and the Christian obligation to utilise it. In the fifteenth century, man was thought of as “the most fortunate of creatures and therefore worthy of all admiration” (Pico 1486:2). The glory of man was that G-d left us to rise to an infinite potential on our own accord: ‘Thus he took man as the product of an indeterminate nature... The other creatures have a fixed nature which is fixed within limits prescribed by me. You, unhampered, may determine your own limits according to your own will... I have placed you in the centre of the world; from there you can better see whatever is in the world. (Pico 1486:3)’. In the Oration of the Dignity of Man (1486), Pico della Mirandola proposed that men could ascend the chain of being through the exercise of their intellectual capacities, and profoundly endorsed the dignity of human existence in this earthly life. The root of this dignity lay in his assertion that only human beings could change themselves through their own free will, whereas all other changes in nature were the result of some outside force acting on whatever it is that undergoes change. He observed from history that philosophies and institutions were always in change, making man's capacity for self-transformation the only constant. He also endorsed the idea that when a man fails to exercise his intellectual capabilities, he vegetates, descending the Chain of Being and is resigned to something lesser than a realisation of humanity. Through this vegetation, this man becomes one of the very things Man is given dominion over in the bible, and becomes one of the very things Man must manipulate in order to rise to his potential. Therefore, when resource utilisation is a realisation of humanity, technology is, in its most literal sense, a measure of man.

This theory of resource utilisation as a crystallisation of the human potential was the grounds for many Western colonial projects. Most notoriously, in the ‘New World’, where the ‘collective indigenous failure to cultivate an epistemology of technology’ could only be interpreted through Western dichotomous thinking as a failure of human potential. The indigenous population were hence amalgamated with nature, and were exploited alongside the ‘New World’s’ natural resources, usually without any appreciation of Indigenous philosophies concerning Nature and resource utilisation. Due to the evangelical and aggressive nature of Western colonialism, this led to the destruction of indigenous cultures, societal structures, philosophies, catechisms, and histories. Because Western Christian civilisation was seen as an enlightenment force against the ‘failed indigenous race’, there was little to no sympathy towards the indigenous people, and no respect for the dialectical thinking

that permeated their ecocentric cultures. Dialectical thinking is the complete opposite of dichotomous thinking; dialectical thinking recognizes the importance of contradiction, change, and synthesis and it also includes recognition of the value as well as limits of modern epistemological approaches. Within dialectical thinking, bipartite anthropology has no basis, and neither does anthropocentrism. Many indigenous cultures rely heavily on dialectical thinking to form complex belief systems, societal structures, cultural dialogue, catechisms and a history of civilisation. Most Indigenous peoples rejected the idea of exploitation as a measure of Man, and rejected a Christian Chain of Being as something that was inapplicable within their society.

In conclusion, as we explore Western ideas about nature, we unveil how western dichotomous thinking, rooted in a dualistic worldview that separates humanity from nature, has been instrumentalized to justify the exploitation and domination of both natural resources and indigenous peoples. This anthropocentric paradigm, reinforced by Judeo-Christian doctrines, justified colonial endeavours under the guise of human potential and progress. However, it also fueled the destruction of indigenous cultures and ecocentric philosophies, dismissing their dialectical approach to nature and resource utilisation. As we are now in the 'Anthropocene Epoch', it is clearer than ever that Western ideas about nature have shaped our planet irrevocably, and in tandem, the effects of Western colonialism have shaped our planet irrevocably.

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