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# The Cartesian Trap

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**Keywords:**

*dualism,*

*nature,*

*Deleuze,*

*life*

These  
are

*terrifying*

products  
of  
dualistic  
thinking.

We

(read - 'The West')

like to divide things up

into

*chunks*

or

split things

in two.

A hang-over from the Enlightenment.

**Citation Link**

Apparently,

culture is human-made stuff,

whereas *Nature* is that green stuff

...over there...

(where?).

We use dualisms all the time,

mostly without thinking

about it,

like day and night,

men and women,

culture and nature,

mind and body,

black and white,

civilised and uncivilised,

organic and inorganic.

Thinking this way influences our behaviour,  
our laws,  
our beliefs.

But this isn't (*really*) real.

There isn't a cut-off point when day becomes night.

We don't have such a switch.

Not only is there also a dawn and a dusk,  
but there are many other times  
that aren't fixed and bound  
by ... time.

*It's fluid.*

More like a spectrum,  
one state constantly moving  
into another state.

*Plugging in and out,*

says Deleuze<sup>1</sup>.

A pluralism  
(many things)  
rather than a dualism  
(two things).

Or  
(thanks D&G<sup>2</sup>).

*Monism = Pluralism*

The same is true for 'all' dualisms,  
including

men

and

women.

And I'm not just talking about there being more than two 'genders'  
(the cultural construction of what we'd like to be known as – male, female, agender, bigender,  
genderfluid, genderqueer, and so on).

There are also more than two 'biological sexes'

in many species,

including humans,

depending on how we decide

to *measure* it

or where we place

our boundaries.

For example,

there aren't solely XY chromosomes

(males)

and XX chromosomes

(females).

There are also XXY

(also referred to as Klinefelter syndrome),

and so on.  
 XYX,  
 XXYY,  
 XXXY,  
 XXXXY,  
 XXXXY,

There are many so-called 'conditions'  
 that blur the biological distinction  
 between  
 male  
 and  
 female.

Some people with an X and Y chromosome,  
 who would usually be labelled as male  
 may also appear as female,  
 physically.

This is also known as Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS).

But why should chemical messengers  
 or clusters  
 like chromosomes  
 or testosterone  
 be the standard to measure this distinction anyway  
 (or any other golden rule, including phenotypes and size of gametes that determine whether they  
 become  
 sperm  
 or  
 eggs)?

There are a variety of continuums  
 from female to male

*(and beyond)*

with no distinct borders.

There are so many in-betweens.

In fact, that's all there are.

Ultimately, it is *us* who decide what counts  
 as who is male

and who is female,

not biology.

Biology is simply an often-useful tool  
 that we invented but can be distorted  
 to our ideologies,  
 culture wars,  
 and real wars.

Just as conversion or reparative therapy...

considered as the *cure*  
for transgender *feelings*  
(rather than therapy as *support*  
for gender dysphoria)

is a terrifying product of pseudo-medical dualistic thinking.

Just as clitoral stimulation was a treatment for *female hysteria*  
by male physicians

(the diagnosis of which was removed from the DSM in 1980)

is a terrifying product of pseudo-medical dualistic thinking.

Just as the Cartesian mind-body split  
has led to the taboo and underfunding of so-called  
*mental* ill-health

compared to  
physical ill-health

...when it's all just ...

well ...

health.

A terrifying product of dualistic thinking.

Just as the human-environment split  
has created

psychology

as if it were separate from

physiology

which leads to therapies  
that focus on

*the human bound-by-the-skin*

A terrifying product of dualistic thinking.

Mind-Body

and

Male-female

and

Nature-culture

dualisms

often lead to pseudoscientific ideas

about biological superiorities,

like the idea that homosexuality

is '*unnatural*'

or the racist claims of

Carl Linnaeus<sup>3</sup>

and

Ernst Haeckel<sup>4</sup>,  
 whose ideas of racial hierarchies  
 were used by the *nazis*  
 to justify their own versions  
 of ethnic cleansing.  
 The nazis thought of themselves as a forest people  
 (of a *pure nature*),  
 untainted by foreign blood  
 (of a *pure race*).

These same ideas  
 have been used for eugenics programmes  
 around the world,  
 aiming to improve the genetic quality  
 of supposedly superior races.

Sometimes,  
 hierarchical biological ideologies  
 of pure nature  
 and pure race  
 merge to make genocidal behaviours  
 seem more acceptable.  
 This might sound a little extreme,  
 but it happens.  
 More often than we like to think.  
 And in my lifetime.

For example,  
 in the U.S.,  
 up to 50% of First Nations women in the U.S. were  
*sterilised*  
 over the first ten years of my life.

This  
 is  
 a  
*terrifying*  
 product  
 of  
 dualistic  
 thinking.

The artificial divide between what is considered organic  
 and what is considered inorganic  
 is just a useful invention

that makes it easier to study things in isolation.

But it's not real.

Humans  
put that division line  
between these two concepts  
and have come to think it's  
a rule.

A truth.

Reality.

We get taught this at school.

*A frog is organic*

because it contains a carbon atom.

*A stone is inorganic*

because it doesn't.

Unless it does.

Like limestone and dolomite,  
for example.

Then we get picky.

'But these rocks  
are made up  
of previously living  
organic things',

we might say.

And it goes on.

This is sometimes known as

*carbon chauvinism.*

Cities are both organic  
and inorganic  
*simultaneously,*  
not a mixture of both,  
like the current biological rulebook would have us believe.

The problem here  
is that we have become  
extremely limited  
in our understanding  
of how *life*  
could be conceived.

We have come to think  
biological organisms  
are somehow superior  
to *mere* inorganic materiality.

You know,

the very stuff that makes *you* what you are  
- minerals and water,  
for example.

It also privileges  
a *Western Biological Position* (WBP)  
over many Indigenous people’s views,  
who might infer  
that *life can be articulated  
in all things,*

including rocks.  
This WBP is a hierarchical way of thinking.  
It’s a top-down approach  
that can lead to arrogance.

I try to veer away  
from dualisms  
and hierarchical biological thinking.  
I make no such distinction  
between  
organic  
and  
inorganic.  
Henceforth,  
I shall use the term  
*(in)organic*  
to denote this  
simultaneity.  
Not two distinct things.  
But one thing  
(which is also many  
- think the murmuration).

Philosopher Karl Marx<sup>5</sup>  
was also interested  
in this distinction.  
In his 1844 manuscripts,  
he introduced the term,  
*‘inorganic body’*  
- meaning the *whole* of nature  
- and *‘organic body’*  
- meaning the subjective experience  
of being a discrete entity.  
It sounds counter-intuitive,  
but I think he was simply



experimenting  
 with philosophical concepts  
 to make sense  
 of human's relationship  
 with the environment.

But he didn't mean  
 organic  
 and  
 inorganic  
 as opposites  
 or dualisms,  
 like *life is to death*,  
 for example.

Marx meant these terms as  
*'potentials of one another'*,  
 both having qualities  
 that develop from  
 and into one another  
 but are still one thing,  
 one body  
 – just 'experienced' differently.

And later,  
 philosopher Gilles Deleuze coined the term  
 'inorganic life'  
 – the idea that life cannot be bound  
 in an organic vessel.

But,  
 to me,  
 these terms  
 still perform a separation  
 of sorts.

Okay,  
 they suggest *life*  
 can be attributed  
 to inorganic things  
 like rocks,  
 great,  
 but they still fall  
 into a *dualistic trap*  
 by admitting there are some things  
 that are organic  
 and some  
 that are inorganic,

no matter how much life  
you might attribute to them.

Again,

this might be a useful ploy  
to study things in  
but,

isolation,

as polymath Gregory Bateson<sup>6</sup> inferred,

*you can't carve nature  
at its joints*

because

*there are no joints.*

We might lose important knowledge  
about the meshwork of information processing  
if we carve it into chunks.

This

is

a

*terrifying*

product

of

dualistic

thinking.

## Endnotes

1. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze thought with the useful concept of 'assemblages', that can be plugged in and out of, to example the multiplicity of life as relational (or process-relational), as opposed to discrete objects or subjects that perform individually over-and-against one another.
2. D&G refers to the French authors Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who considered themselves an assemblage (with many other intra-acting materials/agents) when co-authoring.
3. Swedish biologist and racist Carl Linnaeus was the founder of binomial nomenclature, the taxonomic system used to classify the so-called 'Natural world'.
4. German zoologist and eugenicist Ernst Haeckel was the founder of ecology.
5. German philosopher Karl Marx was the founder of Marxism, author of Das Kapital and co-author of the Communist Manifesto.
6. English anthropologist Gregory Bateson was a pioneer in ecological systems-thinking and was influential to family therapy.

## Author

**Jamie Mcphie** is an associate professor in Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences and the course leader for the MA Outdoor and Experiential Learning degree at the University of Cumbria. As a former performance

artist, he has combined his interests in art and eco-philosophy to influence a more creative approach to outdoor and environmental education, research, mental health and wellbeing, therapeutic landscapes and environmental aesthetics. More specifically, he is interested in how mental health and well-being is distributed in the environment - politically, socially and ecologically - and enjoys exploring novel and equitable ways to perform (post-qualitative and post-human) research in a variety of communities.

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