

Human Exceptionalism: The Barrier to Sustainability

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Introduction

How can it be that our accelerating environmental crisis is caused by a species that is a mere speck on the spatiotemporal scale of the cosmos? We live in an Anthropocene epoch that promotes the marginalization of non-human entities in pursuit of human satisfaction. The belief that humans are ontologically distinctive means we are unsympathetic to the consequences of activities like overconsumption, pollution, and deforestation. But the current environmental crisis now threatens humanity's very existence, so there is a need to care. Even with the implementation of recent climate change initiatives, the exploitation of natural resources is still at an all-time high, greatly attributed to the individual's continual need for more. Human progress can be defined as an inexhaustible process driven by the need for human well-being and satisfaction, which is ultimately unattainable (Coccia and Bellitto, 2018). In tandem, human exceptionalism threatens our ability to reach sustainability. Western thinking, built on individualistic ideologies, ignores our interconnectedness with non-human beings and encourages resource exploitation for personal gain. To come close to living sustainably, there needs to be a cultivation of interspecies ethics moving from anthropocentrism to biocentrism.

The western paradigm encompasses our anthropogenic worldview and is unsurprisingly rooted in colonialism. Grounded in dominance over the environment, the western paradigm threatens our ability to become sustainable and silences holistic knowledge. Indigenous ways of knowing assign equal personhood to all beings, initiating a cycle of reciprocity between people and the natural world (Mazzocchi 2006). Reciprocity is a gift economy, a relationship founded in gratitude, where the giver is simultaneously the receiver. Indigenous ways of knowing "understand that one life is dependent on the life of all" (Kimmerer 2013) and that interconnectedness with the natural world is a requirement for survival. Because of this, sustainable practices are an organic byproduct of Indigenous culture. But even with incorporating these elements, is modern society capable of overcoming the fallacy of human exceptionalism and shifting the paradigm in pursuit of sustainability? In this essay, I argue human exceptionalism prevents us from moving away from the current western paradigm and is the roadblock to sustainable living.

Metaphysics and Human Exceptionalism

Western Metaphysics

The anthropocentric paradigm is a synthesis of western culture and thought. To understand how the current paradigm obstructs our ability to move towards sustainability, it is essential to establish the interaction between western metaphysics (in this context synonymous with ontology) and human exceptionalism. In a critical review, Srinivasan and Kasturirangan (2016) define human exceptionalism as “ontological claims about the uniqueness of human beings [which] are bound up with claims about the ethical superiority of humans over all other life-forms”. By this measure, the goal of human exceptionalism is to “maint[ain] [the] ontological and ethical [divide] between humans being and all other life forms...” (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan 2016). In western metaphysics, separation of human from non-human dates back to Cartesian dualism, which proposes “animals, plants and nature were composed of mechanical matter, and God consisted of mind, whereas humans alone were a mixture of both” (Abram 2010). Descartes’s declaration of “*I think therefore I am*” attributes human uniqueness to our ability for cognitive thinking, which proves our existence. Other western theologies argue the same, concluding humans are irreducible to nature and intrinsically different from any other non-human being. Carl Linnaeus’ proclamation that there are no distinct physical characteristics between man and ape opposed earlier Cartesian metaphysics. Unsurprisingly though, the notion that human and apes were physically identical was unsettling to western culture and much of the eighteenth-century science was devoted to finding evidence of humanity’s anatomical distinctness (Anderson and Perrin 2018). Definition of oneself as a distinct entity is a commonality throughout western theologies. As such, human exceptionalism is the basis of western metaphysics because it conceptualizes ‘self’ as individual uniqueness from all other beings, including other humans. If human exceptionalism is intrinsic to western metaphysics, how is it possible to dismantle this relationship to shift to a new paradigm?

Indigenous Metaphysics

Kimmerer (2013) suggests gratitude as a way to challenge the fallacy of human exceptionalism. Gratitude - acknowledging and thanking the natural world for what it provides, is fundamental to Indigenous metaphysics. Blackfoot metaphysics, as described by Leroy Little Bear, states when a society claims a territory, a culture arises from the relationship between the people and the land, and from this culture come values, customs, and paradigmatic traits (Little Bear, 2021). Indigenous thought

describes the universe as constantly fluctuating with waves of energy (spirit) pulsating animacy through all things (Little Bear, 2021). The spirit binds all creation together, balancing the relationships between all beings to maintain cosmic order. Indigenous 'ways of knowing' do not value humans as being unique from non-human beings. Instead, Indigenous metaphysics is holistic and cultivates interspecies respect. In Haudenosaunee culture, reciting the Thanksgiving address reminds the individual of their responsibility to uphold mutual respect (reciprocity) with all things in the natural world (Kimmerer 2013). The definition of self as an intrinsic part of the natural world's intertwined web is the commonality throughout Indigenous theologies. Could the use of gratitude incite reciprocity with the land? If true, incorporating indigenous ways of knowing into sustainability practice may diminish (not eliminate) human exceptionalism, allowing the transition towards sustainability. Little Bear postulates that native science is rooted in sustainable practices because it recognizes that humanity exists under finite conditions that must be maintained (Little Bear, 2021). Therefore, human exceptionalism is the antithesis of Indigenous ontology because it fails to recognize how humans and the land are innately one.

Human exceptionalism in the Anthropocene

Within our current Anthropocene epoch, human exceptionalism is magnified because of our capitalistic economy. Paradigms are conceptual frameworks used to define how the natural world should be viewed and how we exist in it. The industrial revolution initiated the shift in our current western paradigm, where success was marked by economic growth and technological advances. The introduction of mechanical machines increased production by making natural resources more accessible. The environment was seen as a source of free capital because its "gift is deemed to be free because we obtained it free of charge, at no cost" (Kimmerer 2013). Short term, there were no repercussions of our environmental exploitation feeding our belief in human superiority over the land. As the average salary rose, so did our human exceptionalism, and unsustainable practices became a social norm. It seems unlikely, given that the current time period is built on profiteering of both the environment and people, that anything can shift us away from these unsustainable practices. But even if human exceptionalism is intrinsic to the western paradigm, we have not always been in this environmental crisis. This means that human exceptionalism, at one point, was able to co-exist with sustainability. Although this would have occurred in the pre-industrial era, before colonialism, it

nevertheless points out that other metaphysics have the capacity to subdue human exceptionalism. This provides hope that Indigenous ways of knowing may help in solving our sustainability crisis.

Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Sustainable Practices

Personhood

The lineage of our current anthropocentric worldview can be traced back to western dualism. The dichotomy of humans and non-humans is rooted in binary thought, and categorizes beings as animate or inanimate. In western science, inanimate beings can be described as non-living objects who lack conscious thought (Van der Heijden 2021). As rational agents, a western construct that defines oneself based on empirical knowledge rather than emotion or religion, we cannot empathize with inanimate objects (Van der Heijden 2021). Therefore, the view of the land as lifeless means its mistreatment has no moral or ethical consequences. To move towards sustainability, the land must be viewed as something we live for, not an object we live off. Kimmerer suggests that language can be used as a “mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things.” (Kimmerer 2013). Personifying animals, plants, and the land with human characteristics creates a space for dialogue between humans and the natural world. The land as an emotional being, capable of feeling, thinking, and knowing, makes it hard for human exceptionalism to justify its exploitation. However, “English”, Kimmerer remarks, “does not give us any tools for incorporating respect for animacy.” (Kimmerer 2013). The binary structure of the English language categorizes non-humans as “*it*” and humans as “*she*”, “*he*”, or “*they*” and makes interchange of these pronouns grammatically incorrect. Kimmerer (2013) remarks “Saying *it* makes the land into ‘natural resources’” and reinforces the view of the environment as an object. It is unrealistic to expect English speakers to address everything using personal pronouns, but their use in sustainability initiatives subliminally influences people's view of the natural world. For example, the fifteenth sustainable development goal could read, "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems by sustainably managing *their* forests, combating her desertification, and halting and reversing her land degradation and biodiversity loss." (Sustainable Development Goals 2016).

Gratitude and Reciprocity

Even if sustainability initiatives successfully promote personification of the natural world, it is unlikely that this alone will shift us away from the current western paradigm. Self-gratification, or anything that satisfies the individual, is amplified by human exceptionalism and our capitalist economy. We are superior, we want wealth, and we will satisfy our wants. The Anishinaabe story of the Windigo depicts a human whose hunger creates a cannibalistic monster (Kimmerer 2013). Kimmerer (2013) describes the Windigo as “the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else”. Indigenous ways of knowing would argue that the pursuit of human process has “overpowered [our] self-control to the point where satisfaction is no longer possible” (Kimmerer 2013). Human exceptionalism ignores the natural limits of the Earth because economic growth satisfies the self and maintains quality of life (Kimmerer 2013). Before the environmental crisis affected us, self-gratification was intertwined with policy because it meant economic growth.

However, Indigenous ways of knowing suggest that gratitude as a mechanism for the dissolution of human exceptionalism is possible. Gratitude reminds us “not just to take only what we need, but to take only that which is given” (Kimmerer 2013). Personification engages humans in a conversation with the natural world, and gratitude nurtures this into a reciprocal relationship. Human exceptionalism puts no limits to where human progress will end, but Kimmerer suggests that “gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness”. What if the fourteenth sustainable development goal was to read “We thank the oceans and seas for *their* marine resources and promise to conserve and sustain their gifts.” As of now, our sustainability initiatives only ask the question ‘What can be done to stop this environmental crisis?’, and leave out ‘Why are we in this environmental crisis?’. Therefore, the addition of gratitude could be what is needed to move us towards sustainable practices.

Conclusion

The goal of my essay was to examine the relationship between human exceptionalism and the current western paradigm, how this relationship is a barrier to sustainable living, and if adding Indigenous ways of knowing to sustainability initiatives can move us towards sustainability. I conclude that Indigenous ways of knowing cannot eliminate our human exceptionalism, but they can diminish it. Incorporation of its values into sustainability initiatives portrays the natural world as a community of living beings and reminds us what *they* provide us. Use of Indigenous ways of knowing in

sustainability initiatives exposes western culture to Indigenous metaphysics and suggests a hope that we could shift away from our current western paradigm and move towards more sustainable living.

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