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Dividing and Conquering: The Dualistic Roots of Environmentalism and Its Foes

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DIVIDING AND CONQUERING: THE DUALISTIC ROOTS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM AND ITS FOES

COREY BEALS

INTRODUCTION —THE DISEASE

I was born with a disease. It was in my bloodstream before I was born, and it was in the food I ate, in the air I breathed, and the water I drank. Mine is a story of learning that I have a serious disease—an inherited disease made worse with addictive patterns of my own. It is a story of awakening to this fact and desiring healing and journeying toward recovery. But in order to tell this story of my addictive disease, I will need to tell not only how I got it, but also how it originated long before I was born, how it spread through our culture, and why it is so compelling. I also hope to suggest some possible ways of recovering from this addiction.

The story of my disease is not a solitary story involving me alone. It is a story of people who developed this disease and gradually introduced it amongst their own people within several generations. The gradual introduction of the illness allowed one to live with it without dying from it. In fact, one of the strange effects of this disease was that those who had it thought that they were healthier than people who did not have this disease. So they were eager to spread it across the world. But when they introduced it suddenly to indigenous cultures that had never encountered it before, it killed them in large numbers. The disease I'm talking about is *not* smallpox. The disease I am talking about is dualism.

1. DUALISM DEFINED

Since the term dualism gets used in so many different ways and in so many different contexts, I will more precisely define the type of dualism to which I am referring. Dualism, as I will be using the term, takes as a premise what I will call the separability thesis, which has

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roots in Descartes' famous 'separability argument' regarding the body and soul (from the Descartes' *Sixth Meditation*). In this paradigm-changing work of philosophy, Descartes argued that if we could conceive of the body and soul as distinct from each other, then they must be independent substances (that is, separable). The argument says that if I can conceive of the mind without the body, or the body without the mind, then they are not identical. And if not identical, then they are separable substances. The unstated assumption at play in this argument, however, is what I am calling the separability thesis:

If two things are distinguishable, or distinct, then they are separable.

By 'separable,' I mean that they can exist independently from each other as separate substances. The focus is usually on the question of whether or not these are distinct substances. But Descartes does not argue *for* the separability thesis; rather he argued *from* it. So while many critics of Descartes might point to his mind-body substance dualism as one of his worst contributions to culture, I would say it is the separability thesis.

While presupposing the truth of the separability thesis—that if two are distinct, then they are separable—Descartes goes on to argue that the mind and body are distinct. He argues that since he can conceive of himself as a thinking thing even if he didn't have a body, and because he can distinctly conceive of an extended body without having the capacity to think, those two things (mind and body) are distinct. He concludes his argument that because "I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it."¹ This last italicized phrase (italics mine) is where he slips in the separability thesis as if it were the most obvious truth in the world. But he does not argue for it. He argues from it. And nearly 500 years later, that one little phrase continues to shape Western culture as if it were unquestionably true. And this un-established assumption is required to make his argument work. A way of presenting the full argument (complete with the assumption) would be as follows.

1. If two entities are distinct, then they are separable ("can exist without each other").
2. The mind and body are distinct from one another.
3. Therefore, the mind and body are separable.

Most of those who reject Descartes' dualism do so by rejecting premise (2) of the argument above. Such arguments might be motivated by the fact that they intuitively know that the conclusion (3) is false, so they reject premise (2). There are various ways of doing this that could all fall into the broad category of monism. Monism, in general, is the belief that all of reality is just one type of substance. The monists reject dualism by arguing that the mind and the body are the same thing. Three of the most notable forms of monism are materialism, idealism, and pantheism. Materialism argues that all of reality is just material, and that what appears to be mind is just reducible to material, and can be entirely explained in terms of material reality. Idealists, on the other hand, argue that all of reality can be reduced to ideas in the mind. Idealists explain that material reality only appears to exist as a separate substance, but that in reality, everything is just an idea—in the mind of God or in the mind of some other creature or collective set of creatures. These seem like opposite views, but they both are types of monism. A third type of monism is pantheism.² This is the view that all things are one, whether it appears to be matter or mind, divine or human—it is all the same. There are no distinctions between divine and human or between mind and matter because everything is one, and everything—taken up together—is divine. While all three of these monist theories of ultimate reality are vastly different in many respects, they nonetheless share something significant in common. Each of these views challenges Descartes' second line in the argument, and each of these view leaves the first, assumed line of his argument unchallenged.

While dualism is a target of this essay—insofar as I hope to show the origins and consequences of dualism—the central player of this essay is the separability thesis. It is this separability thesis that I will suggest is at the root of much of our current ecological problems. Before looking further into the roots and consequences of dualism, though, it will be helpful to identify some examples of the many different forms that this separability dualism takes.

2. STRAINS OF SEPARABILITY DUALISM

One example of separability dualism is the dualism between land and humans. When I unknowingly lived as a human/land dualist I acted from the belief that because land and humans are different, I am entirely separable and independent from the land on which I live.

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It did not matter where I was living—I was the same person wherever I was. Or so I thought. I acted as if how I treated the land I was living on or how it treated me were incidental to my existence. And since I thought that the place I was living and breathing was merely a secondary property of my existence, it did not occur to me that living in eight different places in twelve years had any significant bearing on who I was as a person.

I was not necessarily an abuser of the land, but I definitely saw it as separable from me. I might avoid dumping gasoline on the ground—perhaps out of duty, but not because doing so would do any harm to *me*. I might be aware that clear-cutting a forest was harmful ecologically and aesthetically to the *land*. But the fact that this had any metaphysical impact on me as a person was foreign to me.

This detachment from the land is made all the more acute by putting many layers of concrete, pavement, oil, steel and/or plastic between myself and the land. If I am sitting in a car, I am sitting on an oil-based plastic which is layered on top of several layers of steel, which is layered on some oil-based tires, which sit on top of on oil-based pavement, which is layered on crushed gravel which may then be resting on bull-dozed soil that has removed any unique shape in favor of a flat surface. Dualism allows us to place many layers of artifice between ourselves and the soil, and those layers then create a state of detachment making it easier to further detach from the land. So it is easy to see how this disease can become more acute over time.

Another strain of separability dualism is individualism, which is a dualism between the self and the other. This is the view that just because a person is different or distinguishable from another human, he is thereby fundamentally separable and independent of that human. This human/human dualism is very similar to human/land dualism. And the symptoms are similar as well. Just as I can only mistreat the land if I think it is separable and independent from me, I can only mistreat another human if I think that the other human is separate and independent from myself.

In its earliest and most curable stages, this individualism is simply selfishness and self-centeredness. That form of individualism is so obviously immature and vicious that usually one can begin treating it simply by drawing attention to it. But the most dangerous forms of individualism are those that become disguised as scientific or philosophically sophisticated ideologies.

As I studied philosophical theories of the self, whether it was a self that was metaphysically grounded in freedom or in rationality or in will-to-power or even in creativity, these theories all were centered on the *individual* self. As attractive and noble as a theory of self based in freedom or rationality may have appeared to me, they each nonetheless were focused on an autonomous self. Any *relational* qualities in these theories came as secondary or tertiary properties of the self. The relation with the other was not constitutive of one's core being. Relations with others—in the leading predominant philosophies I studied—always came as a secondary extension of the individual. But common to each of these views I tried on was the assumption that I was fundamentally distinct from others and was therefore separable from others metaphysically.

3. THE SPREAD OF DUALISM

It is hard to trace exactly how I discovered the ways in which I was deeply influenced by dualism. But somewhere in the process of looking to philosophy for ways to bring more integrity to how I perceived and lived life, many of the conversations I was reading began to ring false when it became clear that modern philosophy could not seem to connect being and doing or the individual and the other. Despite numerous attempts by brilliant philosophers to derive ethics from an ontology, none succeeded. Despite the attempt to show that ethical obligations to the other could be derived from individualistic accounts of the human being, all of them failed. So that left me with two apparent options. I could either keep trying to develop an ontology that entailed ethical responsibility for the other or I could admit defeat, and concede that since no ethical responsibility could be derived from an individualist account of the self, ethical responsibility must not exist as a true reality. The latter seemed ludicrous to me and assaulted my deepest intuitions, yet the idea of continuing the heretofore-unsuccessful search for an individualist account by being more intellectually rigorous than Kant and the rest of them seemed equally ludicrous. That is what led me to finally question the assumption that a theory of the self should assume an autonomous self that is separable from others. That is what prompted me to question assumptions that I had not even noticed as assumptions—assumptions common to my culture that I began to see were rooted in philosophies that had become widespread and commonplace centuries ago. My

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dualism, to a large degree, was inherited. So I began to trace the genealogy of my disease. And while there was not a single individual, there were a few who were especially influential in introducing and spreading this dualistic disease.

There were many philosophers/theorists who applied dualistic thinking to their respective fields of thought—Thomas Hobbes applying the dualism of self and other to political theory; Adam Smith applying the dualism of financial value and moral value to economics; Isaac Newton applying the dualism of Creator and creation to science, and Friedrich Schleiermacher applying the dualism of literal interpretation and metaphorical interpretation to hermeneutics. In a sense, each of these figures is considered a ‘father’ to his academic discipline, since the very idea of a discipline that is separable from other disciplines is another child of dualism. These divisions had a way of multiplying. But for the purpose of this paper I want to focus on another father of dualism who may have appeared earlier in the spread of this disease and had an influence on many of the dualisms that emerged later. That figure is Francis Bacon. He is often referred to as the father of the scientific method, and introduced multiple forms of dualism, not least of which was the dualism between efficient causality and final causality. Dualism nearly always was part of a larger sequence of events—dividing and conquering. While dualism divided two entities previously seen as inseparable, it nearly always followed that one of the two dyads would be embraced as superior and the other would be rejected—or at least neglected.

Descartes divided body and mind, and then gave preference to the mind rejecting the validity of knowledge that was bodily. Hobbes divided the other from the self, and elevated the self above the other. After Smith divided moral value from financial value, he set financial value ‘free’ from any moral influence. After Bacon separated final causality (or questions of metaphysical purpose) from efficient causality (or questions of cause and effect), he blatantly dismissed questions of purpose elevating questions of cause and effect to a place of sole significance. Bacon was not unclear in the least that he was dispensing with any form of final causality, and reducing our account of knowledge to include only efficient causality.

So it should come as no surprise to us that we find Bacon using the same strategy when it comes to the dualism of humans and nature. He sought to separate out humans from nature and then to elevate humans over and against nature. His goal was to use the efficient

causality (newly freed from final causality) to put Nature through a sort of Inquisition in which she was questioned in a controlled and constrained³ setting until she was forced to give up her secrets.⁴

And in practice, even if this was not the intent of any particular thinker who first proposed the separability, what seems to have happened historically in every example of a dualistically divided way of engaging a field of thought is that one or the other of the separated dyads becomes elevated as important while the other is either rejected or neglected. Divide and conquer.

4. QUERIES

Now that we have looked at dualism, specifically the separability thesis in which dualism is rooted, and a variety of ways in which this has been applied, I want to raise a few questions for our consideration.

1. How does the perception of separateness affect us? Perhaps it does not seem like a problem that we are metaphysically separable from God, others and the rest of creation. Is it worth considering the consequences of these dualistic separations on our relationship as humans with the rest of creation? If I view myself as different, yet deeply connected with all of creation, will that have a significant impact on how I relate to creation in contrast to viewing myself as entirely detached and separated from all of the rest of creation?
2. If the separability thesis is at the root of our ecological brokenness, then what is the way to heal this disease? Can it be solved by merely developing a new ethic? Can it be solved by merely developing a new hermeneutic? Can it be solved by merely developing a new theology? If the root of the disease is a metaphysical one, then it seems that the cure for the disease must also be a metaphysical one. Perhaps we *do* need a new ethic, a new hermeneutic and a new theology, but if these new theories are not rooted in a non-dualistic metaphysic, then will the new ethic, hermeneutic or theology be capable of treating anything more than the symptoms of the disease? What sort of metaphysical transformation must take place before the disease rooted in dualism is healed?
3. If we need a new metaphysical understanding of ourselves and our relationships with God, others and the rest of

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creation, then how will that metaphysical transformation occur? We may do well to consider how the metaphysical transformation transpired at the hand of Descartes and Bacon.

- a. How did Descartes use a meditative discourse to change hearts? (Ironically, the meditation, which is a less argumentative genre and one that is aimed at taking both mind and heart on a journey together, was used to dismiss the validity of the heart in matters of knowledge.)
- b. How did Bacon use an imaginative discourse to change the way people envisioned themselves and their world?

If we are sufficiently convinced of the inherent failure of the separability dualisms to understand, describe, and relate to God, others, and the rest of creation, then where do we go from here? Ironically, the philosophical/theological tradition that has predominated in the West over the last half millennium has also tended to answer that question in binary terms, assuming the separability thesis. The answer is either dualistic or monistic. We have been given two options: 1) We can embrace difference and be forced to accept separability, or 2) we can deny separability and be forced to deny difference. But is there a third option? What if we chose instead to reject the separability thesis and seek a metaphysical view that goes beyond the usual dichotomy of dualism and monism? Is it possible to embrace difference and reject separability at the same time? Is such a view logically and practically sound?

I think such a space exists. What if such a third way is not only possible but is the best fit for describing reality? Might it be that this separability thesis has in fact led to the panoply of ecological crises we find ourselves facing after trying to deny a third way for so long? If we move beyond monistic and dualistic thinking to triadic thinking, what will result? We have given the other two options a full test; is it not time to accept the consequences of such thinking and try a third way?⁵

ENDNOTES

1. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, (1641). Trans. Donald Cress, 4th Edition. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998. Meditation Six, section 78, p. 96. Italics mine.

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2. There are different types of pantheism, and not all of them necessarily qualify as a monist view. But insofar as a pantheist holds that all of reality is part of one divine Being or one unified divine substance, then that particular type of pantheism is monist.
3. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, (1603). Transcribed from the 1893 Cassell & Company edition by David Price.
4. Carolyn Merchant, “The Scientific Revolution and The Death of Nature” *Isis*, 2006, 97:513–533
5. I intentionally end this with a query, since I do not have space here to address the question. I am currently writing a book for Baylor Press in which I am exploring triadic thinking as an alternative to monism and dualism. Hopefully, this question will inspire further discussion as we try to find our way out of the problems generated from monistic and dualistic thinking.