

non-dualism, and its implications on art-making

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Introduction

Western thought has been in thrall of a dualistic, anthropocentric worldview since Descartes. We see the rational human being as profoundly and fundamentally different from the material world. Is it possible to challenge that and imagine a non-dualistic, post-anthropocentric worldview, one where human and world are not fundamentally *other* but fundamentally *same*?

I will, first, provide a brief introduction to dualism and anthropocentric thinking and explore why it has become vital that we question these.

Following this I will draw on the work of German philosopher Wolfgang Iser and show how he theorises the world-innate-ness of the human in light of evolutionary theory of cognition. I will then refer to early Buddhist philosophy and examine the teachings on conditionality and non-self. Going on to create a sketch of a non-dualistic, post-anthropocentric worldview, I will explore both the human and the world as non-essential and perpetually changing states of being that are deeply relational and fundamentally *same*,

proposing a radical rethinking of what we mean with *human* and its relationship with the *world*.

There is a strong mind over matter bias in contemporary art-making. 'Anything goes' says the current maxim, but only provided it is framed rationally. How can we rethink authorship from a post-dualistic, post-anthropocentric position?

Looking at abstract painting, I will ask how we can rebuild authorship, keeping in mind the fluid and relational quality of subjectivity, a position radically different from the mind over body position we are trying to leave behind.

Art-making as a consciously reflective interaction of *human* and *world* becomes the locus of a rethinking of the human/world relationship. Can art-making become a blueprint for a more ethical, greener, mode of being in the world?

Dualism/Anthropic thinking

...on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing [that is, a mind], and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply and extended non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.¹

In 1641, with *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes, declared the fundamental difference between mind and body. He writes "...it is certain that I am really distinct from

¹ Descartes, René. "Sixth Meditation" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated and Edited by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 62

my body, and can exist without it.”² “Really distinct” is a technical term in Descartes’ writing that suggests that mind and body are not only different but of fundamentally different essence. When Descartes says “I am a thinking being” he does not mean he is a material being that also thinks but that he is foremost a thinking being and the material form is secondary.³ This was the most radical expression in a line of thinking that places cognition above sensation that goes back to ancient Greece.

Descartes’ motivation was largely religious, the mind/body distinction proving the idea that the soul (here synonymous with mind) could go on living after the death of the body. Yet, this thesis had an impact far beyond religious application.

Wolfgang Iser, in his book *Mensch und Welt – Eine Evolutionäre Perspektive der Philosophie*, argues that much contemporary thinking, including contemporary cultural and social studies, is based on this same assumption of a fundamental incongruence between human and world.⁴

As it is his thinking nature that makes the human different from the world, the human can only connect with the world through his mind, as a result he sees the world only as a construction of the mind and never the world-in-itself.

*We look at everything through the human head and cannot cut this head off; while the question remains, What would be left of the world if it had been cut off?*⁵

² Descartes, René. “Sixth Meditation” in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated and Edited by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 62

³ Iser, Wolfgang. *Mensch und Welt*. München: C.H.Beck, 2012. 59

⁴ Iser, Wolfgang. *Mensch und Welt*. München: C.H.Beck, 2012. 56

⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All too Human*. Translated by Helen Zimmern and Paul V. Cohn. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2008. 15

The human being lives in a world that begins with the human and ends with the human, it is entirely anthropocentric. Philosophically, this is also described as an idealist view. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides two basic definitions of modern idealism:

1. **Ontological Idealism:** something mental (the mind, spirit, reason, will) is the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality, and
2. **Epistemological Idealism:** although the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that we can *know* about this mind-independent “reality” is held to be so permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge.⁶

We can see that in both versions of idealism the gap between the human and the world cannot be bridged, as Wolfgang Welsch points out. In an Ontological Idealist world, there is no world-in-itself, the idea of a world-in-itself is also a construction of our minds and in an Epistemological Idealist world the world-in-itself cannot be reached because it lies outside of what our human minds are capable of knowing. We appear to be trapped in a mode of thinking that begins and ends with the human: a thoroughly anthropocentric thinking. A radical alternative needs to be found in order to overcome the gap, and leave behind the trap of anthropocentrism.

Apart from arguing that anthropocentric thinking is flawed, I would also like to point out that anthropocentric and dualist thinking are both deeply harmful. From the beginning of the mind/body dualist discourse it was clearly a matter of mind *over* body, and so became a question of dominance. The human’s call to tame and control nature on one level and men

⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/idealism/> (accessed 30 May 2019)

dominating women on another – man having been habitually aligned with mind and woman with body. Mind/body dualism is the seed for many a discourse of dominance-driven binaries. Might overcoming the mind/body dualism and anthropocentric thinking allow us to move towards a more cooperative, non-hierarchical mode of living?

Evolution of cognition

It seems clear that much of our experience of the world is constructed, is conditioned and sometimes even determined by our physical, cultural and social conditions but could it be that at least some of our experience is of the world-in-itself? Might it be that our minds and the physical world are not entirely incongruent but come from the same place and as such are fundamentally not *other* but *same*?

Wolfgang Welsch suggests we look at the human/world relationship from the point of view of evolution in order to understand how the mind and the world are inextricably linked.

Rationality used to be considered the exclusive domain of humanity, yet,

research conducted in recent decades has shown amazing examples of animal rationality.

Famous examples include bonobo chimpanzees learning language with the help of symbols

and dolphins recognising themselves in mirrors. The basic structure for rationality was

established long before humans came along. Differences are of gradual, not essential

nature.⁷

⁷ Welsch, Wolfgang. *Mensch und Welt*. München: C.H.Beck, 2012. 90

We know, from an evolutionary point of view, that living beings are fine-tuned to their environments. The same is true of cognition. Basic cognition started to develop with the very beginning of living beings, evolving through a feedback loop with the world. Starting with chemical attraction and repulsion, over the development of such basic cognitive skills are understanding the solidity of objects (most animals appear to know that they need to move around a tree and can't go through it) or continuity (if the zebra goes behind a rock the lion knows it has not disappeared but will appear, again, on the other side of the rock) to the very advanced cognitive skills of the human being. Our cognition is based on many evolutionary successes in cognition that happened long before there were humans in the world.

Welsch suggests that when a species, which not only shows cognitive aptitude but where this cognitive aptitude becomes the actual fitness and success characteristic, as it is the case with homo sapiens, these cognitive achievements must show a considerable world-accuracy, otherwise they could not guarantee the survival and extraordinary success (for which they carry the main responsibility) of this species.⁸

Mind has developed to help the being survive in the world. This does not, of course, mean that we have a thorough and complete understanding of the structure of the world nor that we understand the world in the only way possible.⁹

⁸ Welsch, Wolfgang. *Mensch und Welt*. München: C.H.Beck, 2012. 130

⁹ Welsch, Wolfgang. *Mensch und Welt*. München: C.H.Beck, 2012. 131

Evolutionary theory suggests that at least some of our knowledge of the world needs to be knowledge of the world-in-itself as otherwise the mind, which evolved to aid our survival, would not have been effective.

Looking at mind and body from this point of view we come up with a rather different picture. We now have a picture of a mind that is not aloof from the world but inextricably a part of it. We now have a picture where there can be no mind without the world, without the body. We have gone beyond both dualism and anthropocentric thinking.

The Buddhist teachings of non-self and conditionality

We will now look at some aspects of early Buddhist philosophy that also deal with this same problem of the mind. At the Buddha's time, circa 500 BCE in Northern India, there were many wandering philosopher-monks, spiritual seekers who were looking for enlightenment. Different wandering sects had different philosophical ideas that were discussed and debated. The most hotly contented topic may have been that of the true nature of the unchanging core of selfhood, the true nature of the soul, to use Descartes' term.

What all the various views had in common was the idea that the true self, *atman* in Sanskrit, *attā* in Pali, was permanent and unchanging, the true essence of the being. The Buddha turned these discussions on the head by questioning the very idea of a permanent self. He placed enlightenment not with uncovering the true self but rather with the insight that everything we could possibly call self: physical form, volitions, feeling (that is sensation),

perception, and consciousness are all observably *impermanent*, or changing, and so cannot be 'self', but is *anattā*, non-self in Pali.

The Buddha's overarching goal was to find an end to suffering. He believed suffering had its root in ignorance, *moha* in Pali. Ignorance here does not mean a lack of knowledge but rather being caught up in an illusion, the mental construction of a permanent self and a permanent world and not being able to see the world as it really is, that is as non-self (*anattā*) and impermanent (*anicca*).

paṭiccasamuppāda

The other important concept the Buddha used to question the existence of an unchanging self, besides *anattā*, is that of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, dependent arising, or conditionality.

Put very concisely, the teaching of conditionality puts forth the "doctrine that phenomena arise and cease through causes".¹⁰ In other words, everything that exists, exists dependent on conditions, when the conditions cease it will also cease.

This concept provides the basis of Buddhist ontological thought, the nature of being,

Buddhist scholar Bikkhu Bodhi writes:

The ontological principle contributed by dependent arising is, as its name suggests, the arising of phenomena in dependence on conditions. At a stroke this principle disposes of the notion of static self-contained entities and shows that the "texture" of being is through and through relational.¹¹

¹⁰ Bodhi, Bikkhu. *The Great Discourse on Causation The Mahānidāna Sutta and its Commentaries*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society Inc., 2010. 1

¹¹ Bodhi, Bikkhu. *The Great Discourse on Causation The Mahānidāna Sutta and its Commentaries*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society Inc., 2010. 2

If everything is relational, conditioned, it cannot be autonomous and this includes all those aspects of the being that we usually assign to the self, such as thoughts, memories, emotions, and volitions. If everything is relational there can be no unchanging, essential self, only an endless stream of conditionality. The person, then, is a stream of conditioned and conditioning continuity, deeply inter-related with the world and culture around her.

The mind is conditioned by materiality and materiality is conditioned by mind. There can be no duality here, both mind and body are part of the same stream of continuity.

If this idea of subjectivity as something fluid raises questions regarding agency, it only betrays how deep-rooted our mind-over-body bias still is. The question if agency is possible if the subject is not something essential and unchanging but a stream of ever-changing phenomena, if the mind is not autonomous but conditioned by body and world, makes the unspoken assumption that agency requires a permanent self to originate from and cannot come from matter, nor from change.

We now have an image of the human, the subject, as being interrelated with the world on every conceivable level; of mind as something non-autonomous, fundamentally interrelated with body and as much in flux as everything else.

We have gone beyond dualism to a mind/body inter-relatedness and beyond anthropocentric thinking by overcoming ignorance and getting to know the world-in-itself.

What is especially interesting here, for the artist, is that, in the Buddhist framework, this knowledge is arrived at not primarily through thinking but through the practices of *sīla*, that is ethical action, and *vipassanā*, insight meditation.

Agency in flux

Idealism argues that the human world is a world of the human mind, it is a human-constructed world. In its extreme it denies the existence of a world-in-itself, suggesting that that idea in-itself is of the same mould: also a human construction. What we see is conditioned entirely by our human mind. This is anthropocentrism.

Socially we recognise that subjectivity is constructed by family, culture, politics. We see that our thoughts, beliefs, likes/dislikes, even deepest convictions and most heartfelt emotions are conditioned by the culture(s) we grow up in. Ideologies structure and shape us, sometimes even determine us.

The thinking that suggests that there is no way out of this betrays anthropocentric thinking. It suggests as the subject is thoroughly constructed – the subject-in-itself a constructed idea – there can be no subject-in-itself. This is because the bias still maintains that a ‘self’ needs to be autonomous. If we change our view radically and shift away from the idea that agency depends on an autonomous self but recognise and embrace the idea of a fluid, relational subjectivity then we can recognise that there is agency within flux. Indeed, our every action, thought movement, breath is a condition for something else. As there is no autonomous

subject, the subject is interrelated and so not only ever-conditioned but also ever-conditioning. Once we recognise this we can consciously take on agency, responsibility.

The world-in-itself is not the *essence* of the world but the *flux and relationality* of the world. The same is true of the subject. Subjectivity as it really is, is not an essence of selfhood but *flux and relationality*.

Authorship

In art, anthropocentrism and dualism have their main implication on the artist/material relationship. Philosophically, the most important expression of this is in the idea of authorship.

The art critic Yve-Alain Bois writes: "...at the very beginning of its formation as an ontological discourse, modernism heralded the singularity of authorship as its touchstone."¹² Abstract painting, having been "liberated from the burden of representation,"¹³ had to justify its motivation to an unprecedented extent. This justification mostly hinged and still hinges on authorship.

¹² Bois, Yve-Alain. "Abstraction, 1910-1925: Eight Statements". OCTOBER 143, Winter 2013.

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¹³ Bois, Yve-Alain. "Abstraction, 1910-1925: Eight Statements". OCTOBER 143, Winter 2013.

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Please keep in mind that the following discussion is not about the visual aspects of the paintings but rather a discussion on how to approach authorship.

One model of motivation in abstract painting, Yve-Alain Bois described as “...the Romantic idea of the total freedom of the artist...”¹⁴ He sums up Kandinsky’s approach: “what I paint are the deepest folds of my very own soul, accessible to myself alone, if at all, of which I nevertheless claim to offer you a truthful portrait.” We see this approach also in abstract expressionism, the idea that the brushstroke expresses some inner truth, only accessible through subjectivity.

The essence of something is considered unchanging and autonomous, like the idea of an essence of selfhood. Such an essence would be considered unconditioned and not dependent on relations, it could exist by itself. Something of essence by necessity will stand in opposition to an *other*, such as the essence of masculinity stands in opposition to the essence of femininity. In this light, painting that claims to express an essence of selfhood is by necessity dualist.

It can also be described as anthropocentric in the sense that it starts with the human mind, the essence, the ‘deepest folds of the soul’, and manipulates matter in a way to represent that essence.

¹⁴ Bois, Yve-Alain. “Abstraction, 1910-1925: Eight Statements”. *OCTOBER* 143, Winter 2013. 8

Not many artists today claim that their work expresses their deepest soul. This has become markedly unfashionable, indeed untenable, after postmodernism.

Yet, another model, Yve-Alain Bois calls it the non-compositional model, is still very much in use. There are different strategies of the non-compositional model but 'what they all have in common', in Bois' words, 'is a programmatic insistence on the non-agency of the artist: the work must be produced by means that do not rely on the artist's subjectivity, and this independence must be plainly visible to all – it must be part and parcel of the artwork itself.'¹⁵

Bois mentions Daniel Buren's repeated stripe patterns as an example.

Are these paintings examples of something that has gone beyond the mind/body dualism, beyond anthropocentric thinking?

By eschewing subjectivity, by trying to eliminate it, this strategy for painting is countering what it perceives as the naïve notion of expressing the essence of selfhood in abstract expressionism, for instance.

We have a situation here that recognises that subjectivity is constructed and so believes there can be no authenticity. This is because, again, authenticity, or agency, is assumed to require an autonomous self from which to originate, a bias still rooted in the mind/body dualism. If the belief that agency requires an autonomous self is maintained at the same time as having lost the belief in an autonomous self, it is clear that any idea of agency and authorship has become impossible.

¹⁵ Bois, Yve-Alain. "Abstraction, 1910-1925: Eight Statements". *OCTOBER* 143, Winter 2013. 8

The radical next step is to let go of the idea of an autonomous self completely and replace it with a fluid, relational subjectivity.

The non-dualist artist

If we accept the idea of fluid subjectivity, there is no need to suppress a subject but we recognise it as something radically different than previously thought. Nothing coming from this subject can be seen as an ultimate reflection of or expression of its core, rather we see everything as coming from a state of flux and so is something to be held lightly and provisionally.

Imagine painting that does not either endorse or eliminate an essential subjectivity but one that works with a fluid subjectivity. Here the brushstroke is not an expression of the deepest folds of one's soul nor is it a rejection of subjectivity per se. The brushstroke here is intentional, made with agency but an agency that does not stem from an original, autonomous source but one that comes from flux.

The non-dualist artist, the artist of relationality and fluid subjectivity would eschew the idea of a permanent signature style, because no one perfect signature can act as a mirror to fluid subjectivity. The non-dualist artist recognises that subjectivity is relational and so any style, artist persona, intentionality needs to be held lightly, provisionally, as something fluid.

Visually, painting that comes from a fluid subjectivity could be anything at all, nothing lies outside the relational field.

To sum up: the non-dualist artist recognises the fundamental relationality of body and mind, she thinks of subjectivity as non-essential, demonstrating a post-dualist approach. Having embraced relationality she aims to know the world-in-itself, knowing that the key for this is in relationality itself.

Conclusion

We have defined mind/body duality as the fundamental difference between mind and body. We have seen anthropocentric thinking as the philosophical position that, dependent on the fundamental difference between mind and body has concluded that the world-in-itself cannot be reached, the only thing that can be reached is a human-constructed world. We have seen a consequent development of this point that has reached the conclusion that the idea of world-in-itself is also a human construction completing an extreme version of anthropocentrism.

We have discussed two suggestions of how we could move beyond anthropocentric thinking. Firstly the contemporary German philosopher Wolfgang Iser who suggests to look towards the evolution of cognition for an understanding of the interrelation between mind and matter. Secondly, aspects of early Buddhist philosophy that showed us a practice that aims to move beyond the anthropocentric thinking based on an illusory essential self

towards an understanding of the world and being as relational and in flux. In the process we have gained a new image of a subject that is fluid, relational and non-essential.

Discussing art we have seen that abstract painting is ideally positioned to explore the human/world relationship by virtue of the necessity of its motivation being located in authorship. We have seen that much abstract painting has been located around either endorsing or suppressing an essential self, failing to find a new kind of subjectivity to take its place.

I advocate a fluid subjectivity that is fully aware of its own relationality, is non-essential and so providing a way beyond both dualism and anthropocentrism.

A subject that has no need to fully know, understand or explain everything about herself as she knows that there is no one core to her being that she could explain with finality, instead she is a being that, in relationship with the world and her culture, is in continuous flux. As such, her art does not need to have one coherent character, forcefully trying to impose that would be to force an essence on something that does not have one.

The abstract painter is in a special situation where the meaning of authorship defines the motivation for her work, as such this question of the exact quality of how being and world meet is the locus of her work, the pivot-point on which it hinges. By working, through practice and theory, towards a new understanding of the human/world relationship she can work towards a new blueprint for living. This is a blueprint for a more cooperative, non-hierarchical, ethical engagement with other humans, non-human animals, and the world, one not based on dominance but on relationality and interdependence.