

# The Cartesian Trap

Jamie McPhie

Volume 8

Issue 1

Spring 2025

**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),



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 murmururation).

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 isolation,  
but,  
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.

### Citation

McPhie, Jamie (2025). The Cartesian Trap. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 8(1), 20-29. <https://doi.org/10.28963/8.1.4>