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**Decolonizing Nature: Freud, the Ontological Rift, and the Anthropocene**

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Record-breaking heat waves, rising seas, desertification of large areas, catastrophic forest fires, massive storms, collapse of insect and fish populations, dying coral reefs, and mass movements of climate refugees are features of the climate crisis that human beings and other species face. The impact of climate crisis is evident in the rise of psychological distress, which researchers have taken note of in the last 10 years (Pihkala, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b; [Léger-Goodes](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=L%C3%A9ger-Goodes%20T%5BAuthor%5D), T. et. al., 2022; Lim, R. & Hong, J. 2022; Wu, J. et. al., 2020; Boluda-Verdú,I. et. al., 2022; Comtesse, et. al. 2021; Cunsolo, et. al., 2020; Cunsolo Willcox & Ellis, 2018; Cunsolo Willcox & Landman, 2017). But, given the list above, climate change negatively impacts all other living beings and, as E. O. Wilson (2003) predicts, half of the known species will be extinct by the end of this century. We, and by “we” I mean most living beings, are in a world of trouble.

A world of trouble can also serve as a revelatory event, though a disturbing one to be sure. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1999) writes that a burning house reveals “the fundamental architectural problem [that] becomes visible for the first time” (p.115). The Earth is becoming uninhabitable for many, if not most, species, and this reveals core architectural problems in Western epistemologies that undergird political philosophies, some human and physical sciences, and their attending forms of living vis-à-vis other species and the Earth. As Clayton Crockett (2012) argues, “We need to experiment radically with new ways of thinking and living, because the current [Western] paradigm is in a state of exhaustion, depletion, and death” (p.165). To experiment radically first requires awareness and understanding of the architectural problem(s) in our theories and their accompanying forms of relating to the world. This article explores and depicts the structural problem that is evident in the works of Sigmund Freud. More particularly, I argue that Freud’s portrayal of so-called “primitive/savage” people, as Celia Brickman (2018) demonstrates, his representations of “Nature,” and his depiction of other species manifest premises linked to Western philosophical hierarchical, anthropocentric epistemologies and concomitant relations of subordination and subjugation, which together foster the exploitation (zones of non-justice) of other species and the Earth. Indeed, some of the epistemological premises associated with Western Eurocentric colonization of so-called primitive human beings are intricately linked with Western colonization of “nature” and other-than-human species, all of which is evident in Freud’s works.

This article contends further, though briefly, that this has had consequences for developmental theories and analytic practices, especially with regard to the omission of other species in how we understand psychosocial development and therapeutic practices (see Searles, 1960; Kassouf, 2017). To begin, I briefly address postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Western thought, since these critiques point to the architectural problems in Western forms of living vis-à-vis colonized persons and other-than-human beings. These architectural problems are also evident in the human sciences (Go, 2017), in general, and psychoanalysis in particular. More specifically, this excursion provides the context for the idea of decolonizing nature, which is the fourth wave of decolonial literature. This sets the stage to addressing how Freud represented Othered human beings, Nature, and other species. I conclude by briefly identifying some of the implications for psychoanalytic theorizing and practice.

It is important to offer a few clarifications before embarking. First, the reason for focusing on Freud is that he, along with others, built the structural foundation for psychoanalysis and its varied schools. To be sure, much has changed in psychoanalytic theories since Freud, but, as decolonial psychoanalytic scholar Celia Brickman (2018) convincingly argues, some premises that legitimated the colonization of other peoples remain today in psychoanalytic thinking, education, and practice. Unlike Brickman, my focus is not on racialized and gendered representations of Othered human beings, but on the underlying premises and representations regarding nature and other species. This said, much of what Brickman identifies regarding the epistemological attributes racism and sexism parallels how other species are represented and treated. Second, this article is not exhaustive, but rather sketches out the beliefs about and representations of nature and other species. Third, it is necessary to make clear that I am not simply criticizing Freud. Freud, like others of his day, would have been thoroughly educated in Western traditions of thought (e.g., science, philosophy) and could not have been conscious of all the underlying premises that shaped his ideas of and relations to the world. Nor could he have known how destructive Western thought (especially political philosophies that undergirded capitalism) and behaviors were toward the environment,[[1]](#footnote-1) though in saying this, there were philosophers, scientists, and activists—Cassandras all—who were sounding the warning bells regarding human destruction toward other species and the Earth (see Wulf, 2015; Foster, 2020).

**Decolonial and Postcolonial Perspectives**

A brief venture into postcolonial and decolonial discourses is necessary to provide some background for the idea of decolonizing psychoanalysis vis-à-vis other-than-human species and the Earth. Prior to the emergence of postcolonial discourses, there were anti-imperialists who were citizens of various empires, like the U.S. and Britain (Zinn, 2003, pp.313-315), as well as anti-imperialists who were colonized subjects before and after WWI (Go, 2017, p.6). In addition, the works of sociologist W.E.B. Dubois (2016/1903) and others provided critiques regarding the ways Euro-Americans represented and treated black persons. While these works were not directly related to colonialism per se, they certainly were connected in the sense of the legacy of the racial contract embedded in Western imperialism and capitalism (Mills, 1997). After WWII, colonized persons from around the world worked to throw off the shackles of their imperial masters. W.E.B. Dubois, Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, and Aimé Césare are just a few of the more well-known persons seeking liberation. Franz Fanon is of particular interest not only because he was one of the leading figures in the second wave of postcolonial thought, but also because he was a psychiatrist familiar with psychoanalytic theories. For Fanon (2008/1952), psychiatrists (and others in the helping professions) needed to be aware of the social, political, and economic sources of persons’ sufferings. The goals of treatment, he argued, are (a) “to *‘consciousnessize’* [the patient’s] unconscious, to no longer be tempted by a hallucinatory lactification,” and (b) “to enable [the patient] to choose an action with respect to the *real source of the conflict*, i.e., the social structure” (p. 80; emphasis mine). In one sense, from my perspective, Fanon viewed therapy as a process of decolonization. Fanon and others represented the second wave of postcolonial writers and activists, though the term “postcolonial” would later appear to designate the work of Fanon and others. As Julian Go points out, in the early 1970s the term “postcolonial” was used to refer to “a relational position against and beyond colonialism, including colonialism’s very culture” (p.9).

As Western colonialism was ostensibly ending, scholars began recognizing that the legacy of colonialism was alive and well, though not in its traditional understanding of an imperial nation having direct administrative and economic control over another country (Lundestad, 1990). The groundbreaking works of Edward Said (1979, 1994) and Stuart Hall (1997, 2016) delve into the culture of Western colonization’s negative and distorted representations of colonized persons and their cultures. Put differently, while countries had removed the shackles of their colonial masters by the 1980s, there remained epistemologies embedded in Western discourses, narratives, policies, etc. that continue to structure Western perceptions and behaviors toward Indigenous and previously colonized peoples. These epistemologies, as Julian Go (2017) demonstrates, shaped sociological and anthropological research and “findings.” In short, the ostensible end of Western imperial powers did not end colonization and its attending colonizing attitudes and behaviors. As Gayatri Spivak noted, “We live in a post-colonial neo-colonized world” (in Go, 2017, p.56).

The legacy of Western Enlightenment and capitalism has continued to dominate relations between the Global North and the Global South (Chibber, 2013; Klein, 2007). This recognition has shifted the impetus of postcolonial studies to the desire and need to decolonize Western apparatuses. [[2]](#footnote-2) What Go (2017) calls the third wave of postcolonial discourses has turned to a flurry of researchers interrogating their theories and practices: decolonizing feminism (McLaren, 2017), social theory (Go, 2017), education (Absolon, 2019), anthropology (Harrison, 2011). The vast majority of this third-wave literature focuses on the decolonization of human beings, though, more recently, some are seeking to decolonize nature and other species (DeVos, 2023; Meijer, 2019, 2020), which may be considered the fourth wave of postcolonial discourse.

Postcolonial and decolonial discourses have not escaped psychoanalysts or those trained in psychoanalysis. As mentioned above, Franz Fanon is a key figure in postcolonial thought. Decades after Fanon, Willy Apollon (1996) notes that “as a clinician and theoretician preoccupied with the epistemological presuppositions of a psychoanalytic practice,” he seeks to free himself “from the ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism that today dominate the theory and the practice of psychoanalysis” (p.43). Similarly, Nicole Simek (2011) argues that Freud’s “work was unavoidably inscribed in, or influenced by, Europe’s 19th and 20th century colonial projects. In this sense, a postcolonial Freud is one who cannot be thought outside the colony, outside the epistemological and social underpinnings of European imperialism that his work reflects but also challenges” (p.227).

Around the same time, Celia Brickman (2018) delved into racism and sexism evident in Freud’s work—racism and sexism linked to colonial epistemologies. More recently, Sally Swartz (2022) explores psychoanalysis thru the lens of colonialism and its legacy of racism. There are three points to highlight here. First, some psychoanalysts have been interested in engaging postcolonial and decolonial thought in an effort to critique psychoanalysis or to use analytic frameworks to understand the psychosocial dynamics of colonialism. Second, while there has been some interest in postcolonial and decolonial thought in psychoanalysis, it remains largely a fringe topic,[[3]](#footnote-3) suggesting that more needs to be done. Third, much of the focus of decolonial and postcolonial thought has, understandably, focused on human beings, which means there has been little or no attention and work on decolonizing other-than-human species and the Earth,[[4]](#footnote-4) which is a reason for this article. Perhaps the fourth wave of postcolonial thought is decolonizing Western beliefs and practices vis-à-vis other-than-human species and the Earth.

**Architectural Problems in Western Thought and Psychoanalysis**

Postcolonial and decolonial discourses are rightly critical of Enlightenment political philosophies that produced ideas of (Western) human progress, universality (of Western ideas/values of human nature), and Eurocentric white superiority/hierarchy that legitimated and justified the depersonalization and instrumental exploitation of Indigenous peoples, Africans, other-than-human species, as well as the lands in which they resided. I contend, however, that these are all symptoms and attributes of a deeper flaw in Western philosophies, namely, the “deep ontological rift…between animal and human” (Dickinson, 2015, p.173).[[5]](#footnote-5) That is, the rift entails “a radical and total discontinuity between human and nonhuman” (Kompridis, 2020, p.252), which is a part of the assumptive world of most Western persons.[[6]](#footnote-6) Bruno Latour (1993), Jacques Derrida (2008), and Isabelle Stengers (2023) similarly observed this, indicating that Western epistemologies create two “entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhuman on the other” (Latour, 1993, pp.10-11). For Agamben, Derrida, Stengers, and Latour this rift, this key architectural problem/reality, is produced and maintained by apparatuses comprised of Western political philosophies (and theologies) and evident in most of the natural and human sciences.

Identifying some of the attributes of this rift will provide a clearer picture and serve as a foundation for addressing Freud’s views of other species and nature. But I want to begin with the rift that is evident between human beings before taking up the issue of our relations to other-than-human species. The main attribute of the rift, which is evident in Western colonization, is the depersonalization of Indigenous peoples, and, correspondingly, the depersonalization of Othered species. Personalization involves the recognition and treatment of an individual as a unique, valued, inviolable, responsive subject (see Macmurray, 1961; Løgstrup, 1997).

Personalization is the basis of ideas for justice, ethics, and politics. To be a person is to be included in the polis and to possess, actually or potentially, political-social agency. Of course, in Western political philosophies, recognition of other human beings as persons varied in degree. In Aristotle’s polis (Barker, 1971), women were included in the polis and deemed to be persons, but they were denied political agency, which accompanied illusions of their inferiority (with regard to the belief that they possessed a diminished capacity for reason when compared to adult male citizens). This continued for millennia in the West. Here we see a hierarchical valuation already present in personal recognition, as well as the attending belief (viewed as an existential, universal fact) that women “lack” or had a “deficient” capacity for reason. Of course, male non-citizens in Aristotle’s polis, while deemed to possess the capacity for reason, were denied full recognition and thus retained limited rights and protections. Worse, slaves were treated as included-excluded Others, which we might consider as the seed for the lack of personal recognition and use of instrumental reasoning in the construction and treatment of Indigenous peoples.

Personhood, while variously applied in political thought and practice, was and continues to be in Western societies mainly attributable only to human beings. Before shifting to other species, it is important to say more about personalization vis-à-vis Freud’s view of “uncivilized” peoples because this sets the stage for the depersonalization of other species. Throughout his corpus, Freud makes numerous references to “primitive” peoples, juxtaposing them with civilized human beings, arguing that “civilized” people emerge later from the primal horde. In addition, Freud, like others of his day, believed primitive peoples were stuck in the early developmental animistic “stage” (e.g., 1926, p.217). Less frequent is Freud’s use of the term “savages” to refer to human beings from pre-civilized past and those in the present who continue to have animistic beliefs (e.g., 1913, p. 99).

As Brickman (2018) and Swartz (2022) note, scientific and political discourses in the 19th and 20th centuries that used the terms “primitive” or “savage” were racialized and gendered and part of the apparatuses of Western imperialism. These terms and their attending beliefs accompanied a tendency to depersonalize people who were constructed as primitive. “They” were lumped together, ignoring singularities and placed on the lower rungs of human psychosocial development and historical progress. Depersonalization was evident in suggestions that “people” lacked this or that higher capacity, such as reason. “Lack” referred to complete absence, as in the case of other species, or diminished, as in the case of children (which for males was deemed potential) or diminished in women (as was proclaimed in many Western philosophers) or diminished in the case of Indigenous people. In any case, “lack” was associated with an overt or tacit belief/illusion in the inferiority of savages, primitives, other species.

Let me elaborate further about the “lower” rungs evident in Freud’s work. Frank Sulloway (1992) notes that, in the late 19th century, it was commonly believed among evolutionary theorists that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, which means “the development from fetus to adulthood (ontogeny) provides a brief recapitulation of the entire history of the race (phylogeny)” (p.259). This view was adopted by Freud in a number of contexts throughout his works. For instance, Freud (1918) accepted the view of “phylogenetically inherited schemata” of which the Oedipus complex is “the best-known member of the class” (p.119). Similarly, Totem and Taboo represents Freud’s attempt to locate the Oedipal concept in history, while he also held the view that all children go through this stage of psychosocial development. The animistic stage, for Freud (1913), precedes the emergence of civilization (pp.75-78)[[7]](#footnote-7) and is the earliest stage of a child’s development (p.75). Freud essentialized and universalized a hierarchical schema that places higher values on the achievements of civilization and adult maturity and lower values on those “stuck” in the animistic stage of history or development. Indeed, Freud used this hierarchical valuation to posit that neurotics and schizophrenics are individuals who regress or are captive to the animistic stage (1914, p.36). The underlying belief is that primitivity, whether considered in terms of psychosocial development or to label Indigenous peoples, is “lower” and to be surpassed. Of course, surpassing the animistic stage in human development or by way of civilization did not eradicate the animistic stage from human development. Civilized human beings, as evident in neuroses or religious superstitions or war, could regress to these early periods of development and history.

This hierarchical schema linked to terms like “primitive” or “savage” represents a rift between civilized human beings and those constructed as primitive. Naturally, Freud (1913) would have denied this rift, arguing that all human beings have a primitive feature (p.90). Indeed, Freud wrote:

I am laying myself open to the charges of endowing modern savages with subtlety in their mental activities which exceeds all probability. It seems to me quite possible, however, that the same may be true of our attitude toward the psychology of those races who have remained at the animistic *level* as is true of our attitude towards the mental life of children, which we adults no longer understand and who fullness and delicacy of feeling we have in consequence so greatly underestimated. (p. 99 emphasis mine)

Freud was pointing out that Western scientists (and others) believed that primitive peoples and children were cognitively simplistic, lacking the more sophisticated reasoning of civilized scientists. Interestingly enough, Freud was highlighting the rift between adults and children when he said that we, as adults, do not understand children and, in so doing, underestimate their psychic lives. We do not understand primitive people or children because we have “surpassed” the animistic stage and believe it is no longer present in ourselves and in our philosophies or sciences—defense of disidentification, perhaps. While Freud is commended for attempting to bridge this gap, the language of hierarchical valuation (e.g., level, also higher, lower, supremacy) remains.[[8]](#footnote-8) So, while Freud invited readers to overcome their denial of their own primitive or developmental origins, his language retains the valuations that are and were implicated in depersonalizing other human beings, as Brickman and Swartz note vis-à-vis the racism and sexism of Western capitalism and colonization. Put another way, privileging civilized persons over primitive peoples was part of the strategy of Western imperialism and its use of instrumental epistemologies to exploit Indigenous peoples and their lands.

The reason I wanted to begin with human beings who are constructed as primitive is that the rift between human beings who are seen as civilized and those constructed as savages is present and even more pronounced when we move to other species. It is important to stress first that Freud, like Aristotle, considered human beings to be animals. Freud (1927) affirmed that “man is an animal organism” (p.105) and later in this text refers to other animals as our relatives (p.123). Freud also believed that many (Western) people did not think they were animals. He (1933) said we “have no business” excluding ourselves from the “animal kingdom” (p.104). This exclusion or rift he attributes to human arrogance. He (1939) wrote:

We are diminishing the gulf which earlier periods of human arrogance had torn too wide apart from mankind and the animals. The position in the human animal would not be at bottom different. His own archaic heritage corresponds to the instincts of animals even though it is different in its compass and contents. (p.100)

Freud, having read Darwin, was more likely to consider human beings to be a type of animal and, in my view, he gets credit for noticing that arrogance fuels the belief that we are not animals. However, there is more to the story.

While Aristotle considered human beings to be political animals, it is clear that this view attends a hierarchical taxonomic scale with human beings on top and other animals underneath because they “lack” reason and political agency. He excluded other species from the political, except to the degree they can serve human desires and needs (food, labor, war, science, etc.). Moreover, Aristotle’s anthropology excludes the idea that other species are persons or potential persons. This epistemological schema is also retained in Freud’s work despite his desire to diminish the gulf between human animals and other-than-human species. Consider this example: Freud (1927) remarked:

Human civilization, by which I mean all those aspects in which human life has *raised* itself *above* its animal *status* and differs from the life of *beasts*…presents, as we know, two aspects to the observer. It includes on the one hand all knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and to extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs and, on the other hand, all regulations necessary in order to adjust the relations of men to one another. (p.5-6; emphasis mine)

Civilized human beings, which implicitly excludes “primitive” peoples, may have instincts like their animal relatives, but because of reason, and attending political and scientific agency, they are able to control the forces of nature, at least to some degree. This places human beings qualitatively *above* beasts—presumably, animals lacking reason and agency, namely personhood. Years later, Freud (1940) used the phrase “evolution of animals into man” (p.186), which further suggests not only a hierarchy, but also a view of natural history as progressing toward the emergence of human beings, as if the purpose of other species has been to reach the pinnacle—human existence.

To be sure, Freud does refer to animal psychology, animals’ dreaming (1900, pp.131-132), animals’ unconscious (1916, p.189), and animals’ thinking/cognition (1917, p.140). But again, this is framed in terms of higher and lower, with human beings possessing higher capacities for thinking as compared to other sentient species with lower levels. In short, Freud’s work retains Western philosophies’ anthropocentric, hierarchal interpretive framework, which, like the term “primitive,” has decidedly negative consequences vis-à-vis other species.

The first negative feature of this view is its attending instrumental epistemologies and relations vis-à-vis other species. In Western thought, other species are generally believed to be in the service of human needs and desires, which Freud (1930, p.75), in part, recognizes. Other species, if they have any value at all, have *use* value. This is especially evident in the sciences that Freud idealized. Animal experimentation, scientific collecting and dissection of other species, scientific technological gains in killing and processing other species for human consumption are just some past and present examples of instrumental thinking and relating to other species. Indeed, when Freud (p.92) remarks about human achievement of civilization in violently extracting wealth from nature, this evidences instrumental use, and climate change reveals just how devastating this kind of thinking and relating are.

I want to add to this discussion by addressing an attending feature of instrumental epistemologies that is, in my view, implicit in Freud’s work, namely, depersonalization vis-à-vis other species. I suspect that Freud, along with other scientists and philosophers, would scoff at the idea of attributing personhood to other species. Personalization, for scientists, is not a method for gaining knowledge of the object. This said, as indicated above, Freud did consider human beings to have progressed through an animistic phase that precedes civilization and is recapitulated in early childhood. Freud (1927) wrote, “when man personifies the forces of nature he is again following an infantile model….it is in fact natural to man to personify everything that he wants to understand in order later to control it” (p.22). I will comment further about issues of knowledge and control below, but for now let me stay with personification as it appears in the so-called animistic phase of human history and psychosocial development. For Freud (1913), the animistic phase of history corresponds to narcissism vis-à-vis children’s psychosocial development (p.90). “At the level of totemism,” Freud (1917) writes, “primitive man had no repugnance to tracing his descent from animal ancestors…. A child can see no difference between his own nature and that of animals. He is not astonished at animals thinking and talking in fairy tales” (p.140). There are several points to be made here.

First, the narcissistic-animistic phase of development is understood as something to be surpassed and, when it is not, one falls under the categories of either “primitive” or “neurotic.” Human beings, in Freud’s schema, have progressed from the animistic stage, to the religious stage, to science—a stage ostensibly free of the illusions and superstitions of the previous stages, though religion appears to be resisting the inevitable developmental “advancement.” Second and relatedly, Freud is implicitly infantilizing “primitive” peoples and dismissing their personifications of other species as an inferior/lower form of knowing and relating to other species, which would be a common view held by anthropologists of his day. It was, in other words, a perspective embedded in Western colonizing discourses, which included those who viewed themselves as “neutral” scientists pursuing “facts” in their attempts to study and understand “primitive” peoples. Indeed, Western philosophies that produce the ontological rift consider personhood to be a category reserved for human animals (and not all of them to the same degree).This means that Western philosophies dismiss or construct as inferior other species, relying on instrumental epistemologies that objectify other species and the Earth.[[9]](#footnote-9) Freud was part of that tradition, though he attempted to bridge the rift by saying that children also pass through this way of knowing and relating.

There is a third point. Freud (1913) said something interesting regarding children. The “mental life of children...we adults no longer understand and whose delicacy of feeling we have in consequence so greatly underestimated” (p.99). Naturally, Freud worked to understand the mental life of children and “primitive” people, as anthropologists of his time sought to understand Indigenous peoples, though it is another question of whether he (and the anthropologists) succeeded. But we might ask, why do adults no longer understand their childhood (or their children) and its animistic stage of personifying other species? Why did sympathetic anthropologists not understand “primitive” peoples?[[10]](#footnote-10) My answer is that many of us in the West grow up believing that childhood and its ways of knowing and relating must be surpassed, replaced with epistemologies founded on “reason,” objectivity/realism, and science. In other words, we come to believe that epistemologies based in personification are incapable of coming to know the world or other species as they are. This entails the tacit or overt belief, embedded in the epistemologies of the ontological rift, that other “lower” species are not and cannot be persons and cannot be known as such. Other species, lacking personhood, are objects to be understood and used through instrumental epistemologies. Those Western adults who indulge in personification may be tolerated, seen as cute or silly, be writers of children’s books, or seen as regressing to an earlier stage. Non-Western “primitive” peoples, by contrast, are understood to need to be educated, civilized, given science, and give up their personifications of nature and other species.

Let me take a slight detour to further elaborate the personification of other species and attending forms of knowing and relating. Some readers may agree that we need to decolonize Western philosophies and sciences, but resist the view that the personification of other species is a realistic way of knowing and relating to the world. Many anthropologists over the last several decades have sought to decolonize Western anthropological sciences with the aim of understanding Indigenous philosophies and forms of living. Studying various Indigenous peoples in Central and South America, Eduardo Kohn (2013) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017) note that these peoples view other species as persons or potential persons and that this personification, if you will, is, for them, necessary for gaining knowledge of the other creature, the habitat, and themselves. This does not imply that Indigenous people believe other species *qua* persons means other animals are identical to human beings/persons. There is multiplicity of perspectives and multinaturalism inherent in their personal epistemologies.[[11]](#footnote-11) Personification, then, means accepting and respecting the singularities of other species and, in constructing other species as persons or potential persons, Indigenous peoples come to know them in their singularities, which is foundational to perspectivism and multinaturalism. Moreover, this form of knowing is, for Indigenous peoples, necessary for living in and with nature—not trying to control and dominate “Nature,” but rather learning to adapt to nature, in which they see themselves as intrinsically a part of. Put another way, regarding other species, as persons or potential persons, means that they are considered inextricably part of a common world. The fact that Indigenous peoples have lived sustainably for millennia provides evidence of the practicality and effectiveness of their epistemologies that personify other species.

I want to offer another view of epistemologies that embrace personification of other species vis-à-vis Freud’s psychanalytic developmental theory. Freud’s view of developmental progress, whether with regard to human history or psychosocial development, seeks to surmount earlier ways of organizing experience and relations to other species. What if we were to suggest that this is, in part, an incorrect and ecologically damaging point of Western thinking? Imagine that infants’ and young children’s ways of organizing experience and ways of relating to the world of objects were actually evolutionarily important and necessary. Instead of leaving these early semiotic ways of knowing behind, we understand them to become integrated into more complex symbolic constructions of experience—not surpassed or repressed. Consider that the narratives and rituals of Indigenous peoples represent complex forms of knowing that do not exhibit the ontological rift and its instrumental epistemologies vis-à-vis other species and the Earth. The personification of other species, in other words, represents not the animistic stage of psychosocial development, but rather the integration of early and later semiotic ways of knowing that, in the end, possess forms of living that are more ecologically sustainable. Contrast this with the Western penchant for fetishizing reason with its instrumental, depersonalizing forms of knowing that have been implicated in imperialistic capitalism and attending sciences, which continue to be profoundly damaging to other species and the Earth.

Given this perspective, I now turn to how Freud viewed Nature, which is the final piece of my argument and one that furthers the need to decolonize psychoanalysis. In his psychoanalytic study of Leonardo Da Vinci, Freud (1910) opined that Leonardo was the “first man since the time of the Greeks to *probe* the secrets of nature while relying solely on observation and his own judgments” (p.122; emphasis mine). Freud added, “If we translate scientific abstraction back again into concrete individual experience, we see that the ‘ancients’ and authority simply correspond to his father, and nature once more becomes the tender and kindly mother who had nourished him” (p.122). In a later work, Freud (1927) remarked, “It is true that nature would not demand any restrictions of instincts from us, she would let us do as we liked; but she has her own particularly effective method of restricting us. She destroys us—coldly, cruelly, relentlessly…. With these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel, and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness” (pp.15-16).

Setting aside the desire to analyze Freud’s feminization of nature, I want to make several observations. First, there are different feminine representations here. One is the nurturing, kindly mother. Another is the secretive mother who must be “probed” to be understood. Then there is the indifferent or permissive mother who places no restrictions on us, which is closely followed by a cruel, powerful, and obdurate mother who apparently is out to mercilessly destroy us. Second, these Other representations are closely linked to self-representations, which are associated with human weakness and helplessness (p.16), as well as the desire to know (probe) and control the secretive and cruel mother. Third, this is Freud’s dramatic explanation for the emergence of civilization. “It was,” he wrote, “precisely because of these dangers in which nature threatens us that we came together and created civilizations…the principal task of civilization…is to defend us against nature” (p.15). The work of civilization, which emerges out of our weakness and helplessness, is to provide *some* protection from cruel mother nature (p.16).

There is one other point to be made here. Freud, the scientist, personifies nature, which points to the animistic stage—using his schema. This said, my take on this is that Freud, as a writer, was doing this for rhetorical reasons, though it still is worth analytic exploration. I do not think, in other words, he consciously thought of “nature” as a mother, but rather was using a common trope in Western thought. Yet, Freud’s personification of nature reveals a view regarding the psychosocial function of personification. He wrote, “when man personifies the forces of nature he is again following an infantile model….it is in fact natural to man to personify everything that he wants to understand in order *to control it*” (p.22; emphasis mine). Recall that personification represents the animistic stage of development and history. “Primitive” peoples, he believed, personify nature and other species to control them. Similarly, civilized human beings gather together to control and protect themselves from the vicissitudes of nature. Perhaps the difference is that civilized people, having advanced beyond personification, utilize scientific methods for probing and controlling nature.

Freud the scientist is following a Western view of the relation between human beings and nature, going back at least to the science of Aristotle. Aristotle has long been viewed as the first scientist, even as he considered human beings to be animals—part of nature. As a scientist, Aristotle set up elaborate hierarchal taxonomies and dissected (probed/depersonalized) other species to learn about them. Following, but emending Aristotle, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a devout Anglican philosopher and scientist, is credited with proposing the “inductive-experimental method as a replacement for Aristotle’s methods” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.16). Bacon was not alone in making significant changes to science and, like others, he believed that “the practical aim of improving humanity’s lot [depended on] the increased understanding and *control* of nature” (Grayling, 2019, p.197). While Freud may have personified nature as a rhetorical device, he nevertheless was echoing science’s objectification of nature (including other species) for the sake of knowledge, control, and protection.

For a moment, let’s remain with Freud’s formulation. Do children, go through the animistic stage of personifying other species and nature solely for protection and control? Do they do so because they feel weak and helpless? Do Indigenous peoples seek to probe or know nature with the sole aims of protection and control? Do Indigenous people view “Nature” as an object—a thing in itself? There are two major problems with Freud’s formulation. The first problem to be tackled is the perception of and construction of “Nature” as an object that is both distinct from and opposed to human beings (other species are captive to Nature—no distinction). It is not clear that children, in the “animistic stage,” possess an abstraction that views their world as comprising themselves and Nature or themselves as against “Nature.” Similarly, Indigenous people, in perceiving other species as persons or potential persons (Kohn, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2017), neither abstract themselves from Nature nor aim to control it. This is not meant to suggest that Indigenous peoples do not seek to protect themselves or control aspects of their environment. Nor does this mean they do not experience helplessness and weakness. But they are not in a conflicted or perpetually antagonistic relationship with some abstract entity called “Nature.”

A second and related problem concerns personification as a form of knowing. Any cursory reading of children’s literature reveals a great deal of personification of other species (not Nature as a whole). What is evident in this form of knowing is rudimentary perspectivism and multinaturalism, as mentioned above. The characters of these stories are constructed imaginatively as persons, reflecting a diversity of personal perspectives. The ant, spider, dog, cow, etc. all possess different experiences and viewpoints. Moreover, this imaginative way of engaging the world also means there are multiple natures—spider nature, ant nature, cow nature, etc.—and not Nature. In brief, the knowledge gained here comprises a basic perspectivism and multinaturalism, wherein children differentiate between animate and inanimate objects while also believing animate objects have their own perspectives and natures. Moreover, the aims of this type of knowing is part of the motivation to adapt and cooperate—not merely control and protection from “Nature” and other species. Of course, children’s literature contains themes of conflict and peril against dangerous antagonists, but the characters in these stories find ways to cooperate so as to survive and thrive. This is not cooperation of only human beings, but human animals and other animal species. This form of relating to and knowing the “world” is evident in Indigenous stories (see Kerven, 2018; Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984).

As anthropologists have demonstrated in the last 30 years, Indigenous personification of other species entail a type of complex learning associated with perspectivism and multinaturalism that aims at the adaptation, cooperation, survival, and flourishing of themselves and other species. To equate Indigenous personifications with early developmental forms of knowing overlooks the complexity and sophistication of Indigenous forms of knowing—philosophies and, yes, sciences. As indicated above, Indigenous forms of knowing represent the integration of earlier organizations of experience, which are not to be overcome or surpassed. Freud’s anthropology is dismissive of this type of knowledge and relating. Indeed, the Western philosophical and scientific epistemologies Freud relied on to construct his edifice eschew ideas of perspectivism and multinaturalism vis-à-vis other species.

There is another angle to this story. In Freud’s formulation of Nature, Nature is curiously and paradoxically both like us and radically different from us. Human beings, as Freud acknowledged, are part of nature. We are animals. Yet, Nature, as relentlessly cruel, comes across as the enemy—an object of disidentification to be feared and controlled. What are we to make of this formulation, which is not peculiar to Freud but rather a part of Western philosophical traditions? First of all, in light of Jessica Benjamin’s (1995) view of identification as likeness in difference and difference in likeness, Freud’s formulation skews to the side of disidentification. Second, disidentification can have political and societal functions, marshaling people to channel their anxiety and fear into aggression and hatred toward attacking, controlling, and using the object.

The “object” must be known *qua* object to use and control it. This type of knowing results in cooperation of human beings over and against Nature. And as Freud recognized, this has led to remarkable scientific and technological achievements. “The grandeur of the plan (control over nature) and its importance,” Freud (1927) wrote, “for the future of civilization cannot be disputed” (pp.8-9). Yet, he also recognized the danger. “Human creations are easily destroyed, and science and technology, which have built them up, can also be used for their annihilation” (p.6). In trying to have control over nature, the very knowledge Western human beings have garnered in trying to control nature has led to climate change, which threatens not simply human[[12]](#footnote-12) extinction, but also the extinctions of millions of other species (Wilson, 2003). Ironically and tragically, it is not Mother Nature that is cold, indifferent, and cruel, but Western human beings who have sought to probe, objectify, and control other species and the Earth.

Control and disidentification also accompany another key feature, which is decidedly different from “primitive” relations to “Nature.” In trying to control Nature, human beings are responsive to the object that is feared, but not responsible for their destructive actions toward it or to the object itself. A depersonalized Nature, which includes other species, is an object to for which we assume no moral responsibility. Contrast this with “primitive” people who believe other species are persons or potential persons, which necessarily implies not simply responses of adaptation and cooperation, but moral accountability for human actions toward other animals and the environment (see Haraway, 2003, 2016). We can see evidence of this in children’s literature, wherein other species are personalized, as well as among adults who view their pets as persons that evoke a moral accountability from their caretakers. Western philosophies and sciences that undergird Freud’s formulations of other species and Nature have a long history of trying to control nature and use other species, while dismissing and overlooking their moral obligations for the destructive actions taken toward habitats, other species, and colonized human beings.

**A Psychological Interpretation and Implications of the Ontological Rift and the Depersonalization of Other Species**

Freud provides psychosocial reasons for the emergence and necessity of civilization and our collective banding together to control nature and to protect ourselves from it. Evident in his anthropology is recognition of the existential precarity of human beings (weakness and helplessness), which is the motivation for control and protection. Freud was absolutely correct in noting the precarity of human life; however, his theory largely follows Western philosophical traditions in responding to existential precarity by creating an ontological rift between human beings and other species (and Nature). In this concluding section, I offer a different psychological interpretation for understanding how we in the West respond to existential precarity, which I argue is latent in Freud’s formulations. In addition, I briefly proffer several implications for psychoanalysis with regard to colonizing nature and the concomitant need to decolonize psychoanalysis.

Admittedly, all human beings, at one time or another, experience weakness and helplessness, whether it is in relation to each other, other powerful species, or, for a lack of a better term, natural forces, like tornados, earthquakes, etc. However, I suggest there is a feature of precarity that Freud did not attend to, but was present in his theories, and that is existential insignificance and impermanence.

Above I referred to Western philosophies and sciences that produce and maintain an ontological rift between human beings and other species. I also mentioned that Freud viewed this rift as exemplifying human arrogance, which is, in my view, right on target. Yet Freud did not take this further. What are we to make of this arrogance from a psychoanalytic angle? First of all, while Freud was correct, his frequent use of terms like “primitive,” “savage,” and appellations of higher and lower, indicate that the rift is present in the form of arrogance linked to belief (more accurately, illusion) in the superiority of civilized people and their ways of being in the world. This is, I argued above, part and parcel of Western philosophical, religious, and scientific traditions. On the manifest level, arrogance and an attending belief in superiority are for the sake of control and protection, as Freud argued. I contend that the manifest level screens the more frightening and disturbing existential reality of human insignificance and impermanence. Other species are viewed and treated as existentially insignificant and impermanent, because of their putative or socially constructed ontological inferiority.

They are understood to lack singularity and, if they retain any significance, it is their use value. I view the ontological rift and its attributes of hierarchical valuations, beliefs in superiority and inferiority, attitudes of arrogance, and instrumental depersonalizing relations as a psychosocial defense against recognizing and accepting our existential insignificance and impermanence. In psychoanalytic parlance, those of us of who live out of the ontological rift, split off insignificance and impermanence and project it onto “inferior” other species—species who are lumped together, believed to be non-normative (humans are normative—Layton, 2020) and lacking historical-political value (Zeddies, 2002). Yet, if we are learning anything in this era of climate change, it is that human survival and flourishing depend on a biodiverse Earth. More darkly, a mass extinction event may very well include human beings, revealing our existential insignificance and impermanence.

What if we were to embrace our existential insignificance and impermanence, while also decolonizing psychoanalytic theories and practices vis-à-vis other species and the Earth? Decades ago, Howard Searles (1960) observed that psychiatric theories and research focused entirely on human beings. “It would seem then,” he went on to suggest, “that a natural next phase would consist in our broadening our focus still further, to include the investigation of man’s relationships with his nonhuman environment” (p.23). More recently, Susan Kassouf (2017) points out, there has been little done in psychoanalytic theory and research regarding the importance of other-than-human species and the earth in psychosocial development. I suggested a possible direction above, which would include a developmental theory that embraces the personification of other species as integral to adult ways of knowing and relating to other species and the Earth. This would entail eschewing beliefs in human superiority, hierarchical valuations, and instrumental depersonalizing epistemologies, as well as the view that earlier stages of development are to be surpassed.

More positively, it would highlight the necessity of recognizing and respecting the singularities of other species (perspectivism and multinaturalism) for the sake of cooperation and adaptation, downgrading control and protection to secondary motivations. Developmental stages, then, would be viewed primarily in terms of integration. This suggests that changes in developmental theories will also reshape, in part, analytic education and practice. Analytic education will need to be decolonized, not simply in terms of human beings, but also other species and the Earth. Since theory shapes practice, decolonizing analytic therapies vis-à-vis other-than-human animals will mean exploring, at times, the analysand’s (and patient’s) ideas, beliefs, emotions about and concomitant relations with other species and the Earth. In the end, this suggests that psychoanalysis cannot simply and solely entail theories and practices aimed at the well-being of human beings. It must also include the well-being of other species and the Earth (see LaMothe, 2024).

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1. Freud (1930) was well aware how destructive “human beings” are, though he tended to conflate all human beings, leaving aside differences between the forms of living associated with Eurocentric imperialism/capitalism and those of Indigenous peoples, who he labelled as primitive. In addition, Freud (1933) held out the possibility “the process of the evolution of culture” may end in the extinction of human beings, which further suggests his awareness of “human” destructiveness, though, again this was not linked to environmental degradation (p.214). Finally, Freud had read Darwin and, in so doing, may have come across the fact that Darwin was deeply influenced by the work of Alexander Von Humboldt and his concern that colonization was damaging to native peoples and habitats (Wulf, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Giorgi Agamben (2009), the term “apparatus” refers to “a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (p.13). Referencing Foucault, Agamben writes that “in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create—through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge—docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their ‘freedom’ as subjects” (p.19). The apparatuses associated with Christianity include its attending theologies, narratives, and rituals. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) database contains over 144,000 articles and 100 books. The terms “postcolonial” and “decolonial” are mentioned in 119 articles, which is .00082 percent of the total number of articles and books. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A recent edited book by Rick De Vos (2023) focuses on decolonizing other species. Researchers in animal studies have been focusing on this issue for the last two decades. A number of authors in this work also point to differences between Indigenous narratives and relations regarding other-than-human species and Western Eurocentric/Anthropocentric narratives and apparatuses. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ironically, there is some evidence that Freud (1933) recognized this rift. Freud wrote that human beings “have no business to exclude themselves” from the whole animal kingdom (p.204). In another work, Freud (1917a) claimed that the emergence of civilization accompanied a “dominating position over his fellow creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with his supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs. He denied the possession of reason to them and to himself he attributed an immortal soul” (p.140). In his last work, Freud (1939) believed he “was diminishing the gulf” between humankind and other species (p.100), though it is one thing to mention the rift and another to alter one’s forms of living that manifest the rift’s absence. In other words, while Freud, like Aristotle, considered human beings to be animals, Freud’s recognition of the rift or gulf retained the privileging of civilized persons *over* primitive and human beings *over* other species. That these two contradictory ideas exist together in Freud’s works is not unusual. Aristotle considered human beings to be political animals, yet his science and philosophy contained ideas of human superiority and the inferiority of other species, which is a central feature of the ontological rift and its attending instrumental epistemologies and relations of subordination and subjugation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. By “Western,” I mean persons who have internalized the narratives and practices of European anthropologies. There are people and groups in the West, such as indigenous peoples whose anthropologies do not produce the ontological rift. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Freud’s view is that human progress proceeds from the animistic stage, to religion, to science—the pinnacle of human achievement. He never altered this view, which is evident in his later works (1933a, p.164). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There are numerous uses of the terms “higher,” “lower,” “level,” and “supremacy” in Freud’s works and often in connection with terms like “primitive” and “savage,” as well as in relation to other-than-human species (e.g., 1917, p.140; 1927, pp.5-6; 1930, p.68; 1939, p.47). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In his discussion of the Frankfurt School, Malte Ibsen (2023) notes that Theodor Adorno wanted us to “practically reorient our relationship to nature in a mode beyond instrumentalization” (p.134). Western instrumentalization of nature, Adorno noted, has caused cataclysmic damage and this was before people recognized the harms associated with climate change. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An illustration of this is evident the sympathetic approach of Frank Linderman, who was a friend of Plenty Coups and the Crow people in the 19th century. Indeed, he chronicled Plenty Coups’ life. Yet, Linderman remarked, “I am convinced that no white man has ever thoroughly known the Indian, and such a work as this must suffer because of the widely different views of life held by the two races…I have studied the Indian for more than forty years, not coldly, but with sympathy; yet even now I do not feel that I know much about him” (Lear, 2006, pp.1-2). I think Linderman, to his credit, recognized the gap between his knowing and that of the Crow people. This can be explained, in part, by Western epistemologies that reject or construct as inferior epistemologies that are founded on personification of nature and other species. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In explicating perspectivism and multinaturalism, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) contends that “virtually all peoples of the New World share a conception of the world as composed of a multiplicity of points of view. Every existent is a center of intentionality apprehending other existents according to their respective characteristics and powers” (p.55). He states further that “Multiplicity can be taken as a kind of plurality [and] Amazonian multinaturalism affirms not so much a variety of natures as the naturalness of variation—variation as nature” (p.74). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Freud, like many of us, tends to use a general abstraction when referring to human beings, though he uses different abstractions to separate civilized human beings from “primitive” human beings. I realize that the extinction of human beings, resulting from climate change, will include human beings who have for thousands of years lived in cooperation with other species and nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)