Sentience as The Antidote to Our Frenzied Mediated Selves

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Abstract

How did we become a species willing to poison the environment that sustains us? Perhaps, the answer lays in a long history of anthropocentric cultural narratives, that gradually drove many westerners towards sensory and somatic illiteracy, and deeply disrupted our relationship to sentience.

Sentience is a form of sensory awareness that is deeply embedded within our bodies. It simultaneously facilitates internal, social and spatial non-verbal communication; allowing awareness of one's self, others, and of natural sentient eco-systems. Born a sentient being that thinks, feels and senses through the body, westerners are acculturated to become rational beings that ignore their sentience.

This article explores some of the ecosophic dimensions of sentience. It retraces how anthropocentric culture, which developed at the intersection of multiple histories and forms of cultural colonization, has progressively remapped sensory perception with mediated simulations, and profoundly altered our perception of reality. In this process, we grew increasingly blind to the complex needs of our natural sentient environments.

As simulation and data supersede sentient reality, we are becoming disembodied frenzied selves, unaware of the toxicity we bring to our environment. Sentience seems to be the antidote to the internalized western techno-anthropocentric norms fabricated over millennia of sensory oppression.

Keywords

Sentience; Sensorium; Colonization of the senses; Sensory literacy; Anthropocentric culture; Indigenous self; Spatial communication; Rewilding; Universal Recycling.

Introduction

Sentience is a form of sensory awareness deeply embedded within our bodies. It is demarcated by our relationship to space, which plays a much more fundamental role in identity formation, and consciousness, than we tend to realize.

Psychologists consider human behaviors to be derived from coexisting patterns of interactions, between the individual and the environment. They make up a "dynamic field", in which the state of any part of the field depends on every other part. [1] Hence, our consciousness is formulated by interrelations, which are taking place within the body and within the spaces we inhabit. [2]

Sentience is the communication tool of these interconnections. It simultaneously facilitates internal, social and spatial non-verbal communication; allowing awareness of one's self, others, and our natural sentient eco-systems. It is the way to become aware of the environment that sustains us, and to gage our own influence on other sentient lifeforms.

Like breathing, sensing is an unconscious process. When we become aware of its power, we can use it to read the subtle "flow" of space, its invisible order. [3] The earth is a perfect example of this flow. It is always in flux: the wind, rain, and other elements continuously affecting it. The flow of space seems chaotic, as the order it contains can only be experienced and sensed. [4] This flow is called smooth space. It is the medium of "difference", a real system of differential relations that create actual spaces, times, and sensations. [5] Difference is the language of sensory experiences. It is tactile, haptic and sonorous.

As the pre-language experience of sensations, sentience can access "poetic space", the metaphysical quality of the world. [6] It is a deep form of embodied hearing that reaches beyond words, a type of "exposed hearing". [7] Western science is beginning to demonstrate something fundamental to indigenous sciences: we share this primordial form of hearing with all lifeforms and the cosmos. [8],[9]

Even though rarely rendered explicit, we communicate and learn considerably through our bodies. Non-verbal communication is predominant in human interactions. [10] A phenomenon that is not limited to humans. [11]

Consequently, it does not seem far fetch to consider sensory experience as the vocabulary of a universal sentient grammar. Not a grammar existing within the cognitive structures of thoughts. [12] Instead, an embodied pre-language mechanism necessary to feel and sense the world.

This sensing, the "bodily ways of gathering information", is profoundly involved with a society's epistemology, the development of its cultural identity, and its forms of being-in-the-world. [13] The way a culture defines sensorium is one of the most basic elements of making ourselves human. [14] Since understanding of this sensory apparatus is culturally constructed, societal biases can recalibrate our understanding of sentience in unique ways.

Regrettably, a long history of anthropocentric narratives has deeply disrupted western awareness of sentience. As anthropocentrism developed, westerners became increasingly somatic and sensory illiterate. Most urban humans no longer use their senses to be aware of smooth space. Instead, they use various technologies to read the terrain of data embedded in augmented spaces. As the natural world is increasingly understood through the lens of mediation and data, it has become incomprehensible to many.

Countless individuals, localities, cultures and countries do not abide by these ideals. Numerous cultures never stopped being cognisant of the importance of the senses. [15] Perhaps, by looking at sentience in older cultures, we can regain some insights on the importance of understanding ourselves and the environment in a non-anthropocentric way.

Sentience as Embodied Consciousness

First humans developed nomadic cultures rooted in their relationship to the natural world. Their survival in the wild depended on being in sync with the rhythms and cycles of nature's eco-systems. Their heightened senses allowed to read subtle changes in the air that could announce forthcoming weather, food or danger. Human consciousness emerged from both sentience, psychological processes and reason. [16]

In many parts of the world, humans are still deeply connected to this primordial mode of perception, a sensory way of being embedded within the land. [17] Hinduism is an example of such a culture. As one of the most ancient belief systems in the world, it echoes what first humans recognized: that we are part of a natural sentient eco-system, and of a cosmic unity built on interrelations. [18] In Hinduism, the five elements - space, air, fire, water and earth - create a web of life that is shown forth in the structure and interconnectedness of both the cosmos and the human body.

Hinduism celebrates diversity and plurality. As a result, there are many different Hindu traditions, rituals, cultures, and practices. Nonetheless, they share a common notion of Brahman, the true reality of things. It is a sort of cosmic unity that is shapeless, genderless, and bodiless. Sentience is the only way to perceive Brahman, it cannot be described, only experienced. All of nature is part of Brahman, as such humans must be at peace and in balance with nature.

Many indigenous cultures still consider spirit to be embedded in the land. Deeply listening with the body is essential since: "*it is not people who are the best storytellers: the birds, the animals, the trees, the rocks, and the land, our mother, have the most important stories to tell us. These stories exist in place*". [19]

Today, Eco-centrism is a philosophy reviving sentience in western culture. Founded on the ancient idea of unity in diversity, it places intrinsic value on all living organisms and their natural environment, regardless of their perceived usefulness or importance to human beings. It celebrates and respects pluralism, diversity and differences between people and nature's eco-systems. Eco-centrism is emerging as a potential alternative to the Anthropocene culture that is driving us towards our own extinction.

Anthropocentric Colonialist Mono Culture

Anthropocentrism is recognized as the "dominant view" in the history of Western culture. [20] It has facilitated the progressive degradation of humans' relationship to the web of life. In its place, it introduced human social hierarchies and systems of control. Anthropocentrism is constructed on a pyramid of needs, with man at the top, superior to women, themselves superior to animals, and plants. In this hierarchy, self-interest is at the foundation of morality. [21] Thus, personal needs give the right to control or take advantage of those lower on the pyramid.

Anthropocentrism had a profound influence on our understanding of sentience. Born a sentient being that thinks, feels and senses through the body, we are acculturated to become a rational being that ignores his/her sentience.

There is much debate as to when Anthropocentrism started. Very likely, it initiated at different times, and in different places. Some consider the mid 20th century as its starting point, while others date it to the beginning of farming. [22] Others recognize anthropocentrism as profoundly grounded in western theology, often seen as the source of modern environmental problems. [23] Undeniably, in Europe, the catholic church perfected and imposed anthropocentrism through religious narratives interwoven in western visual culture, science and medicine. Nevertheless, anthropocentrism did not start with Christianity, it is the result of multiple histories and eras of colonization.

A Very Brief History of Oppression

Western history is littered with tales of conflicts between empires over territories. Nevertheless, when nature is considered sentient, it becomes evident that it was the first to be colonized through the gradual control of its space.

As humans moved into cities, they stopped sharing space with nature, instead, they began to control it. Over time, as social hierarchies emerged, space became a conduit for meta-narratives and part of power relationships. It became a system of discipline. [24]

In addition to farming, with these social hierarchies, the Anthropocene was beginning to take shape. The transition from foraging to states and empires precipitated new social and political environments. The states born out of the Neolithic revolution, such as those of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, were theocracies, with heads of state playing dual roles of political and spiritual leaders. [25] Giving leaders the status of a god insured the stability of their social system. It also justified the control they exercised over the population.

The first recorded law system, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, reinforced these hierarchical power relationships. Embedded in law, was a culture of control and violence against slaves and women. [26] As Leanne Simpson explains regarding North American indigenous women who are working to preserve their culture: *"The violence against women and the violence occurring against Mother Earth are also directly connected. Haudenosaunee planting ceremonies acknowledge that the women are the seed –*

the connection between the Creator and Mother Earth." [27]

There is a strategic reason for this unending tradition of violence. Demonizing and oppressing women was an important step in stopping the transmission of local culture to the next generations. For colonial social hierarchies to take hold, local cultural norms, knowledge and traditions had to be invalidated, if not eliminated. These were usually transmitted by women, who did so by learning from each other, and passing on knowledge through experiences, from neighbor to neighbor, and mother to daughter. Ancient European healers and holder of the local culture were called "wise women" by the people, witches or charlatans by the authorities. [28] .

The middle ages' European inquisition served to execute wise women. Witch-hunts were forms of genocide designed to silence European indigenous knowledge. The church enslaved people by taking away their ability to live autonomous lives. Without access to local indigenous knowledge, people were obliged to increasingly depend on the church. Women were replaced with church trained doctors, promoters of anthropocentrism. [29] These doctors promoted an oppressive mono-culture of indifference. They did so by transmitting anthropocentric myths through their medical practices.

Myths as Apparatus of Control

Since the beginning of humanity, myths have had for mandate to help us reflect on and understand the present through the wisdom of our ancestors. Myths and spirituality are both important cultural narratives that provide answers to the meaning of existence.

The first humans most likely had individual spiritual experiences through time in nature. Their spiritual narratives probably reflected their connection to the environment and transmitted the importance of the body and space as tools of perception.

Human spirituality transformed into religion as humans adapted to new urban situations. Like spirituality, religion developed as a mean to lessen the fear of dying and understand the meaning of life, but it included new mandates related to social order and urban life.

The organized religion, that emerged 11000 years ago, brought new cultural narratives that stabilized new social orders. [30] Worldwide, religion became an apparatus of control, as virtually all ancient state societies and chiefdoms co-opted collective religious belief to bolster themselves. [31]

Political objectives began to reshape myths. The ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and later the Christians transformed myths, from ethical messages regarding fluid human existence into messages of territorialisation of time, space and behaviors. Over time, people began to forge their lives on the values of these mythical systems.

The infiltration of platonic control in western myths meant that stories began to teach us to mistrust our senses. Plato's Allegory of the Cave suggests that both the senses and visual representations create worlds of illusions. [32]

Neither could show reality, no longer a reference to the natural world, but as another realm of "pure beauty and form" inaccessible to humans. Consequently, our embodied sentience lost its spiritual purpose and the rational for anesthetizing our senses was born.

Christianity pushed this sensory negation further by valuing reason and ostracizing women's carnal knowledge. [33] The story of Adam and Eve tells us that listening to women has dangerous consequences. It also asks us to feel ashamed for existing within the flesh and within nature, and to repudiate sensorial knowledge equated with savagery.

The negative connotations of the snake presented in the myth is a refutation of the cyclical nature of life. Commonly, in many non-western traditions, the serpent often represents immortal energy and consciousness engaged in the field of time, constantly throwing off death and being born again. [34] This immortality was also part of early European indigenous spirituality. The idea of universal recycling integrated death and eternity in the web of life and its cycles. Nothing ever died as it fuelled the birth of something else, everything was eternally part of the land. [35]

These universal recycling ideals were a blatant contradiction to church teachings. They left little room for fearing death, a necessity to make people abide by the rules of the dualistic moral code: the "colonialist good" versus the "evil other", as a determinant for living in an eternal paradise or hell.

Religious myths asked us to stop living in the moment, and to stop sensing the infinity of our localities. Instead, it requested us to freeze our "self" in sanitized, disembodied, delocalized and dualistic versions of ourselves. By accepting these myths, western culture embarked on a quiet journey of sensorial genocide. Our reason became a dominant voice of internalized fear, criticism, denial, and oppression of our sentient being.

As a person failed to meet the church's standards, shame and guilt grew, and the fear of being stigmatized created the need to hide elements of the self that are "faulty" or could be judged negatively. [36] Anthropocentrism shares with the church this approach: it oppresses people by making them feel shame and guilt.

Eventually, western church science and medicine coexisted with religion as some of the dominant transmitter of anthropocentric narratives. [37] Progressively encoded in all societal systems, anthropocentric coercion became increasingly internalized.

Sentience as Madness

Difference became considered a pathology. "Difference", both as Deleuze's flow of space and in its broader senses of all ideas, cultures and forms of beings, was abolished from social life. Difference was relegated to stereotypes of illness, madness and/or stigmatized as abnormalities to be feared and eliminated. Hence, embodied awareness became considered a form of madness. [38]

In its pursuit for control, it is the foundational knowledge of sentient life itself that European anthropo-

centric narratives almost destroyed. Sentience became associated with disease. The way water became despised typifies these destructive tendencies. According to Aboriginal women, water is not only essential to life, health and healing, it is life itself. Water is sentient and forms relationships, it can heal and is essential to both physical and spiritual life. [39] During the 15th century, European urbanization disregarded the importance of clean water. Water became so polluted that it brought illness to many cities. Europeans blamed water, instead of their own actions. Water then became feared and seen as an enemy, to be avoided at all cost. [40]

Western Science as Gatekeeper of Culture

By the seventeen century, somatic illiteracy became common to modern Western society, the contribution that the body makes to everyday experience going largely unacknowledged. When philosopher Margaret Cavendish articulated that, just like the mind, the eye, ear, nose, tongue and all the body had knowledge, main stream philosophers of the time ignored and dismissed her as mad. [41]

This was reinforced by Descartes' famous sentence: "I think therefore I am". Additionally, Descartes' scientific method provided European culture with a process by which to control the flow of knowledge. This made it possible to formally validate, or reject, certain forms of narratives.

The age of enlightenment dimmed sentience. Ever since Descartes, western society has been plunged in a "Cartesian anxiety". [42] An examination of the world as separate from ourselves. This fear has contributed to our becoming disciplined version of ourselves, learning to self-censor our senses and to fear difference which could bring about loss of control.

We became increasingly dissociated from our body. Western science passed off this pathological dissociation as completely normal and unavoidable. [43] Nevertheless, dissociation from our embodied sentience is a form of deep trauma.

Our traumatized western "self" went in a state of freeze response. As we lost the capacity to read body language, to sense and to feel empathy, we became unable to recognize, or react, to the signs of our own embodied oppression.

With modernity, social planners, politicians, and leaders of various industries came to believe that they could remodel and subsequently remake society according to scientific and rational principles. The uniqueness of the individual was negated in favor of statistical averages, humans became seen as abstractions, homogenous social units to be managed and manipulated. [44] This, and the emergence of mass media, set the stage for the existential and environmental crises we are now facing.

Mediated Sensory Anesthetic

Media played an important role in the colonization of our sentience. A process that began when the first humans began to mediate cultural transmission. Human-made symbolic representations of social rituals, that are ordered and disciplined, gradually replaced the experiences of an unpredictable, dynamic, natural and poetic space. [45]

This process began with some of the oldest recorded narratives, cave paintings. The flickering lights of fire would have animated the depiction on the walls. As memories of a previous time or a depiction of the dreamland, these narratives simulated another time and space. Through these experiences, first humans mentally travelled to virtual spaces. This simulation of reality began a process of remapping sentient earth into a terrain of delocalized symbols, which will eventually lead to the simplification of our relationship to the environment.

With urbanization and the loss of embodied personal relationships to the land, sensory information became increasingly described in a medium, instead of experienced. Visual and written culture became a dominant form of storytelling, increasingly carrying static representations of cultural and social meaning. [46]

Without orality, cultural myths stopped to evolve or adapt to their contexts. The environment began to be understood as timeless frozen images and virtual mental constructs. The spirit of the land was lost, religious things (such as a bible or a temple) became sacred instead. [47] Those who could control the recording of their stories, gained a place in history and began to reshape humans' understanding of reality.

The human worship of images of gods embedded in giant monuments, signaled this significant shift. Spirituality and meaning were no longer tied to embodied experiences of the land, they had become related to the worship of representations.

However, for Plato, images were misrepresentations of reality that needed to be controlled in order not to misguide the population. [48] The political manipulation of mediated message for social order became explicit.

As we know today, we learn about social systems through patterns of interpersonal nonverbal communication. [49] By increasingly focusing the mind on mediated narratives, we lost the capacity to consciously read the world through our sentience, and we became unaware of the oppression and social control embedded in non verbal forms of communication. As Desmond Tutu once said: "*When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land*". Colonialist strategies perfected the aesthetics of non verbal oppression, which became embedded in the body, affecting spatial, social and interpersonal relationships in intricate, yet, invisible ways.

By the 19th and 20th century, mass media had become another important apparatus of social control. As Western cities became societies of consumption and spectacles, media increasingly promoted "being" as "having" and eventually "appearing". [50] Individuals were progressively reduced to the role of performers. [51]

Space's social dimensions were compartmentalized. Public space became seen as a stage, individuals simulta-

neously being actors and audience. Only within private space, or one could argue only within the privacy of the mind, could individuals be themselves and get rid of their societal role. [52]

Mass media such as radio, and later television, became windows into other spaces. Through them, we created conceptual frame structures to understand society. [53] These structures function like mental pictures of what should be a "perfect" life.

The environment itself became a conceptual frame with no depth nor sentience. The environment was reduced to a thing for humans to re-shape, without any insights into the consequences these actions would have on its invisible eco-systems.

But smooth space isn't just a system of communication, it carries life itself. As anthropocentric approaches denaturalized life and nature, gradually mechanized and controlled them, westerners created increasingly toxic environments. [54] As demonstrated by 20th century buildings that made people sick, we forgot that humans are vulnerable to the invisible qualities of the space they inhabit.

Frenzied Mediated Selves

Contemporary western tools of perception have adapted to a human consciousness that exists in hybrid techno-natural spaces. We increasingly make sense of the world through mental processes that dance in these mediated spaces. We exist in a frenzy of online social performances and simulated realities, constantly moving from one network node to another. As our mobile devices reconfigure our modalities of perception, mediated narratives are increasingly mistaken for reality.

This flood of disembodied connections affects the development of the self in many ways. Our identity now includes mediated networked selves. [55] We accept that we share technological eco-systems with simulations and machines.

We have reached a time when the body is often seen as a mere container for information and code, which are more important than the material. [56] Mobile sensors, data sets and algorithms are essential to read the invisible data embedded in the technological eco-systems we now inhabit. Nonetheless, they reinforce our sensory anesthesia and cut off access to the embodied intelligence of our sentience.

This disembodied and delocalized life is useful to advance anthropocentric colonization to its next frontier: interstellar space. From a perspective where the body is only a vessel, a technology that can be replaced by another, a consciousness can travel to places like Mars, and colonize the universe by filling it with disembodied human consciousness. [57]

Nevertheless, while we can pretend to live in our minds, our mental health is intricately embedded in the vibrancy of our bodies and our environments. Moreover, individuals without sentience can become toxic, as their sensory anes-

thetic prevents them from appreciating the destructive impact of their way of life on others.

The extensive time spent in online spaces, has opened the door to dangerous toxic consequences. We are losing the ability to be mentally alone and present within our bodies. [58] As a result, alone time often translates into vicious cycles of hyper-focused thinking, which turn our minds into echo chambers, where ideas feedback upon themselves. The toxicity inherent to media frenzies can become our mental reality. When our anxieties and other negative thoughts and behaviors are blown out of proportion, we turn into frenzied selves. We fear embodied solitude, yet, it is the pathway to energize and restore our health, and to rediscover sentience.

Conclusion

We easily forget that if anthropocentric messages dominate our media landscapes, they are not reality, but ideological tools designed to keep us overwhelmed.

We can choose to believe the reductive anthropocentric narratives, which suggest humans must intervene, and take control of people and nature, reshaping it even further. We can continue to consume media that distribute gloom and doom stories and reinforce the shame and guilt complex inherent to Anthropocene oppression.

Or we can choose to participate in a new eco-centric narrative, which focuses on the power of the individual and nature to heal themselves. The "Recoverable Earth" narrative is a story of socio-ecological recovery and wellness, that promotes cultures of self-discovery, environmental recovery and restoration. [59]

Our challenge is not so much to seek ever more sophisticated technological solutions to existential and environmental problems, as it is to re-establish a moral, emotional, and perhaps spiritual, relationship with the biosphere: living with empathy and consciousness, with respect for the land, the plants, the animals, and people. [60]

Sentience seems to be the antidote to the internalized western anthropocentric norms fabricated over millennia of colonialist oppression. It accesses what some call our indigenous self. [61] This part of ourselves lives deep within our body, appearing when we enter natural spaces and leave behind urban spatial conventions. It is the part we need to rewild ourselves and nature.

Rewilding ourselves, by rediscovering our indigenous self, is not an act of cultural appropriation, but a deep personal journey into our own body and, when possible, ancestral knowledge, to revive the language and culture of sentience. This to recalibrate our urban frenzied mediated selves towards a more balanced and healthy techno-sentient understanding of ourselves, that has regained the empathy and emotions we need for a healthier and balanced coexistence with sentient earth.

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