Psychological Expanses of *Dune*: Indigenous Philosophy, Americana, and Existentialism
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Like philosophy itself, *Dune* explores everything from politics to art to life to reality, but above all, the novels ponder the mysteries of mind. Voyaging through psychic expanses, Frank Herbert hits upon some of the same insights discovered by indigenous people from the Americas. Many of these ideas are repeated in mainstream American and European philosophical traditions like pragmatism and existential phenomenology. These outlooks share a regard for mind as *ecological*, which is more or less to say that minds extend beyond the brain into the rest of the body and the surrounding environment.

The cross-cultural strands in *Dune* tie closely to Herbert’s life and interests. An outdoorsman born in the Pacific West, he had an abiding bond with a friend from the Quileute tribe, Howie Hansen. Herbert advocated for aboriginal rights and crafted well-intentioned if slightly stereotypical tales about indigenous characters, partly based on his visits with Northwest tribes.¹ Carl Jung (1875-1961), whose idea of collective consciousness echoes aboriginal views, was among Herbert’s European influences.² So was existential phenomenology, especially as developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). The names of characters in one of Herbert’s novels—*The Santaroga Barrier*—in fact coincide with terms that Heidegger used to articulate how emotionally colored coping with our environment defines our existence.³ Many indigenous philosophers have treated phenomenology and its American cousin pragmatism in approving ways. Indeed, the ideas of North America’s first inhabitants seem to have been absorbed by pragmatists and even earlier by transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).⁴
These different philosophies all advance a place-based psychology. Anne Waters, herself of mixed tribal heritage, generalizes the mindset of her people this way: “American Indian consciousness, and hence American Indian identity is … interdependent with our land base.”

Lee Hester, a Choctaw thinker, adds that practices—not mere beliefs—are most important for native thought. American transcendentalists and pragmatists, as well as European phenomenologists, similarly see hands-on practices and environmental interactions as the core of experience. Extending this a little, they sometimes suggest experience isn’t individual but instead cultural. “Culture” is here understood as interactions within communities that define our worlds and experiences, as when we talk about the “French experience,” “culture” or “world,” or the “experience of parenthood.”

This theme also shows up in indigenous thought. Exploring the Dune universe, we find everything from land-based concepts of personal identity, to the idea of sharpening the mind through hands-on training, to collective notions of experience in cooperative tribes or through the genetic memory of central characters. The stories explore fate versus free will in cosmic contexts, introducing views from indigenous thought and the pragmatic philosophy of William James (1842-1910). Different forms of spiritualism mingle to shape minds and cultural mixtures around the globe, and the same occurs in the Dune series. The customs and personalities of characters fuse elements from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, and especially Islam. The series not only highlights that religion shapes psychology, but also that faith connects to place, especially paralleling Judeo-Christian-Islamic desert faiths. In capturing these points, the Dune novels show that “our values, our lifestyles and even the ways we think and feel have been strongly influenced by our locations in history and geography. The study of the human mind is fundamentally the study of place.”
Place Is where the Mind Is

*Dune* describes Paul Atreides’s ancestral castle on the planet Caladan just before we meet him, linking personal identity to place. These connections are echoed in the names of characters. Duncan Idaho recalls the U.S. state and the Scottish Highlands, evoking rugged unorthodoxy. Duke Leto shares his name with a Greek goddess who searched for a place to give birth, eventually finding the island of Delos. Herbert frequently uses words or variations of them from other languages, even if he doesn’t keep their original meanings. His heavy reliance on Arabic words like Paul’s Fremen name, Muad’Dib, brings to mind arid lands. In the novelized universe, the name means “kangaroo mouse,” a creature admired by tribes on the desert world of Dune for its ability to survive the parched land. “Sihaya” means “desert springtime” and is Paul’s intimate name for his beloved Chani; Herbert’s son tells us that the word derives from Navajo.9

The *Dune* novels shadow Navajo worldviews and those of many other aborigines, who identify themselves according to their mountains, rivers, seas, stars, and animals—in short, their ancestral dwelling places.10 Black Elk (1863-1950) of the Oglala Lakota spoke of the passage of time in terms of seasonal changes in the land, speaking of the Moon of blooming turnip, of black cherries, falling leaves, growing calf hair, popping trees, frost in tipis and more.11 The four directions plus earth and sky also have significance and provide a conceptual framework for religious practices, medicine, and reality itself. Ecological connections are reinforced by rituals like burying the placenta and umbilical cord to mark a covenant between a newborn and the land, or by the sharing of clan names with non-human animals and things like clouds and mountains,12 which happens in *Dune* when Paul takes Muad’Dib as his Fremen name.

Pragmatists and phenomenologists did not develop land-based philosophies. But they did offer ecological psychologies stressing that we don’t see the parts correctly outside of the
whole. So white cloth bathed in candlelight will appear yellow if you’re peering at an isolated patch through a peephole. Similarly, emotions are only vague pangs if cut off from their sources, like the truck that swerved in front of you or the person you achingly love. Pragmatist William James offered some advice: when inquiring into anything, “the living question always is, ‘Where is it found?’”, so that “to know an object, is to lead to it through a context which the world supplies” and discern its “embedded character.” The first lines of Dune give the same guidance for understanding Paul Atreides: “take care that you first place him in his time” and “most special care that you locate Muad’Dib in his place: the planet Arrakis.” Just as we don’t fully get what desert foxes are outside their habitats, we don’t comprehend Paul without grasping Arrakis as essential to his identity—to who he becomes—after arriving from Caladan at age fifteen.

**Desert Identities**

Though the climate of the planet Arrakis—otherwise known as Dune—evolves over the five thousand-year span of Herbert’s novels, the desert is its key feature during Paul’s time there. The arid climate shapes everything from vital water-preserving activities like dressing in stillsuits to rituals that reclaim moisture from the dead, which “belongs to the tribe,” as the books repeatedly state. The desert bestows the basis for the planet’s economy: the spice that is found there, valued for its mind-enhancing, life-extending qualities, and because it makes interstellar trade possible by giving Guild Navigators limited prescience so they can safely guide spaceships.

The sandworms make both the spice and the desert they need to survive. They in fact transformed a wet planet into the parched wastes of Dune after ancients introduced them from some other place, as Paul’s son Leto II recounts, drawing on his genetic memory. Sandworms can kill people, but are also transportation for the Fremen who ride them. Their teeth are
fashioned into crysknives, which have religious significance and are the Fremen’s main fighting weapon. Desert dwellers are addicted to the spice because it pervades their air and food. Consuming the spice essence that comes from drowning a sandworm in water, in combination with Paul’s genetics, elevates his consciousness, giving him prescience. When the essence—sometimes called the water of life—is altered by a Reverend Mother like Jessica or her son Paul (the first male in history with that capacity), it ceases to be poisonous. The Fremen can then use it in spiritual rituals as a psychedelic that fosters a sense of oceanic oneness with the community.

The sandworms affect virtually all aspects of Fremen life and have religious significance, much as the buffalo did for the Lakota and other Great Plains tribes. The Fremen refer to sandworms as “Shai-hulud,” combining Arabic words that mean “immortal thing.” Sometimes they call Shai-hulud “the Grandfather of the desert,” mirroring indigenous customs of referring to important environmental beasts or forces as grandfather or grandmother. Though not quite a deity, there’s a sense that Shai-hulud represents God. Invocation of the name “Shai-hulud” accordingly shows up in religious rites such as death hymns as well as everyday speech. This happens almost as frequently and in the same circumstances that Muslims use their many names for God—especially “Allah”—in phrases like insha’allah, masha’allah, wallahi and alhamdulilla—roughly meaning “God willing,” “blessings in God’s gifts,” “I swear by God” and “praise God.” In Arabic and the languages of the Dune universe, divinely infused words, like language itself, are signposts synchronizing people with each other and their surroundings. Words are also a conduit that believers use to commune with spiritual realms; these realms have physical markers in the environment, whether in fictional sandworms, buffalo, mosques, the holy city of Jerusalem, or a sacred river. All of this together reinforces the identity in ecological philosophies between mind, knowledge, and place.
**Bonding in Landscapes**

It makes sense that Herbert begins *Dune* by saying that knowing Paul means locating him in his place. Arrakis is an organizing nexus for Paul’s stories. It’s the world that Paul’s father dies on, and its deserts hide the surviving Atreides. It’s where Paul gains the allegiance of the unmatched Fremen warriors and meets his love, Chani, among them. It’s the source of spice and hence Paul’s prescience, so it becomes a religious nucleus for his movement. Dune also forces on him habitual routines, from walking arrhythmically to escape sandworm detection, to Fremen customs of speech, to constant vigilance against assassins. In this way too, the planet sculpts Paul’s behavioral tendencies—his personal disposition or character—for “habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self,”\(^ {18}\) said the pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952), echoing ancient Greek ideas.

This stress on habits hints at the importance of bodily actions for mental life: so, fingertips gliding across lacquered wood bring smoothness into experience.\(^ {19}\) And most of our actions are contextualized by social meanings: they involve contact directly with other people or with human-made things like clothes, chairs, and smartphones. For us, weekend-worlds of partying may come together around bottled beer, Tinder, and dancing. Likewise, the entire culture in the *Dune* universe coalesces around the value of spice.

Most things interest us based on their practical uses. William James said that what we’re interested in affects what we see: a carpenter cares for wood and treats oil not as a mess to be cleaned up but as a wood darkener.\(^ {20}\) Heidegger adds that the Old High German word *thing* used to stand for a gathering to deliberate on matters of concern, and for him, these concerns gather worlds around them.\(^ {21}\) At “social gatherings,” whether office lunches or the Fremen spice orgies, collectively desired goals gather people and coordinate their behavior. “Experience,” for Dewey,
is equivalent to culture because it unfolds in the world, and not just in our heads, and because it’s forged in community activity. “Experience” in Dewey’s cultural sense arises in the communal beat of a concert, or public moods we find ourselves in because we’re a member of an angry crowd, or in the collective rhythms of Fremen working in sync.

Indigenous people from the Americas and Africa also stress the collective dimensions of experience. Tribal existence has levels of direct cooperation that make it hard not to celebrate and mourn the group aspects of life. So, Stilgar—who leads the Fremen clan that takes Paul in—repeatedly exclaims, “we work together!” before mounting a sandworm. It’s Paul’s first time as the sandworm’s mudir—Arabic for “the one in charge”—and he repeats Stilgar’s assertion, even mimicking the Fremen leader’s speech. For another example, think of when a Fremen fighter proposes joining his band’s water with that of the Atreides by rendering the moisture from the dead of the House’s troopers, which he says will be done with reverence. He stresses that the “wounded and unwounded must look to the tribe’s future.” As if to affirm this, a few of his men crash their commandeered ‘thopter into a troop carrier, killing themselves but also hundreds of enemies.

The Fremen philosophy is shaped by the unforgiving desert, making them more self-reliant than most. It also teaches the Fremen that those who look only to their own well-being doom themselves by endangering the tribe they need to survive. This echoes Henry David Thoreau, who defended radical individualism, on the one hand, yet, on the other, saw a heavy responsibility arising out of living in an interconnected world, obliging us to recognize that our actions affect people near and far. Both these polarities may have arisen out of indigenous worldviews that provided models for human liberty without undercutting ecological entwinement, outlooks Thoreau studied even while clinging to stereotypes of his day.
Frank Herbert, Thoreau had mixed cultural influences. He was particularly inspired by Hindu writings like the *Bhagavad Gita*, which suggest that enlightenment brings oneness with the universe, an experience Herbert’s Fremen have in their spice orgies and Paul has in his spice trances.

**Working Together**

Fremen settlements, like traditional tribal villages, embody interconnectivity. They are tightly packed cooperatives lacking soundproof walls and lock-and-key boundaries. The scorching desert leads the Fremen to bury themselves underground in cavern communities called sietches. These unmistakably recall the pueblos the Anasazi built into cliff alcoves in America’s western deserts, dwellings which often had seep springs like the Fremen water stores. Ted Jojola of the Isleta Pueblo tribe calls such villages “the collective embodiment of the clanship experiences.”

Groups within the pueblo contributed differing views that together formed the distinctive identity of the village, which in turn existed in the context of the larger cultural experience of the indigenous group. Fremen society likewise includes individuals and families within sietch villages that knit into the broader experience of the desert community.

Collectively working together remains paramount in clan experience, something Paul’s son, Leto II, knows from his youth spent in a Fremen sietch; it appears to instill in him the conviction that “humans are a form of colony organism.” Still alive thirty-five hundred years later, Leto II repeats the same assertion about the genetically engineered Face Dancers and even himself. In calling himself a “colony creature,” he testifies that like his father, sister Ghanima, aunt Alia, and all the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mothers, he also carries ancestral memories. He can even recall the times of Agamemnon in ancient Greece! Because his mind is composed of
jostling personalities, his very identity requires the “solidarity of the colonial group” within him.\(^{33}\)

By referring to himself as a colony creature, Leto simultaneously gestures to his future destiny. This ties to his past in the desert when he merged with baby sandworms called sandtrout. After covering his skin with them, he began transforming into a sandworm-human hybrid, which extended his life by millennia. Leto’s reproductive stage interestingly coincides with his death. This happens when a bridge he’s on is attacked, sending him into water below, which is deadly to sandworms and hence him. Sandtrout, also described as having a colony existence, issue from his dying body, each carrying his psychological essence.\(^{34}\) Now Leto literally splits into a colony of creatures—known as the “divided God”—spread over the land in an endless dream-consciousness that he has no control over.\(^{35}\) At the time of his death, Dune had reverted back to a lush, verdant place, but the reintroduction of sandtrout and the sandworms they turn into begins the reversion into a desert planet yet again.

Leto, then, is fashioned by the planet Dune many times over: first, because he learned the desert habits of the Fremen in his youth; second, because he absorbed massive quantities of spice, changing his consciousness; and, third, because he merged with sandtrout. Leto also returns to the land as the divided God. His journey is an emblem for indigenous beliefs that not only see the land as living, breathing, and spiritually imbued, but also as something that supplies wisdom to the living and reabsorbs it upon their return to the earth in death. This is a reason why removing people from ancestral lands or destroying graves is so painful: it cuts them off from the lessons of those who are in the ground.\(^{36}\) The distress is amplified because the indigenous connection to place is deeper than mere ownership. In an interview, a Navajo woman expressed the incomprehensibility of her removal from Big Mountain, Arizona, remarking: “If we are to
make our offerings at a new place, the spiritual beings would not know us. We would not know the mountains or the significance of them. We would not know the land and the land would not know us.” As Chief Joseph (1840-1904) suggested, tribes and land belong to one another in the same way that family members do. Accordingly, the land and its living things enter indigenous genealogies, telling people who they are and how they got to where they live. This reiterates and enriches a theme found throughout Dune: that knowing something means locating it in its time and place, which also means knowing its wider history.

**Fate, Will, and Worldbuilding**

Near the beginning of Dune, Paul suffers an ordeal with the pain box, which convinces him his hand is being burnt off, even though he’s unharmed. With a gom jabbar—a poisonous fingertip needle—readied at Paul’s neck, Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam will kill him if he withdraws his hand. The choice is between enduring pain or dying to escape it, and the purpose is to differentiate between what the Bene Gesserit regard as animals and humans. An animal would act to escape the pain, even if it means destroying itself, whereas a human will look to the future and beyond immediate suffering. This last idea gets close to William James’s observation that pursuing “future ends” marks “the presence of mentality.” Since passing the test means not being a slave to instinct, this scene also recalls James’s claim that free will is “the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts.” The gom jabbar episode initiates a back-and-forth narrative about fate and free will that pervades all six novels in the series.

Much in the Dune novels weighs against free will. There’s the Bene Gesserit’s ability to rapidly appraise psychology and intone their voice in ways that people find impossible to disobey. Worse, the Honored Matres—remnants of the Bene Gesserit from the Great Scattering
into the cosmos during the fifteen centuries after Leto II’s death—elicit addictive sexual ecstasy that completely enslaves victims. Then there’s Paul, whose mind sees the future in minute detail, suggesting that events are preordained. His son Leto II is even more powerful, aware of virtually every place and time in the galaxy, over which he also exercises nearly omnipotent control.

But there’s some wiggle room: Leto II is occasionally surprised, which typically delights him. This isn’t just because he dislikes monotonous predictability, but because he has an entire program, executed over thirty-five hundred years, to create a human whose actions he can’t predict. Siona, a relative of his long-dead sister, fulfills his project and also orchestrates his murder. As a result, anyone carrying Siona’s genes is invisible to prescience, and this makes them more free than most others. After the Great Scattering into unknown cosmic reaches, humans diversify and spread so as to be beyond the control of the small number of surviving sandworms on Dune, which was Leto’s goal. Events before this evolution were comparable to closely-placed dominos, so that knocking down the first causes the rest to topple. Now events are like dominos packed in groups but with spaces between, so that one cluster can fall without impacting the rest. Even so, the last book ends ambiguously with Daniel and Marty in a garden setting, two odd characters whose control over people in the universe is like a child’s over an ant farm.

While we’re left uncertain about whether there’s freewill, this doesn’t destine Dune characters to inaction. The Fremen exemplify this. On the one hand, they see most things as fated, paralleling Muslims who hold that major events are decreed ahead of time. On the other hand and also like Muslims through history, the Fremen enact daunting agendas like attempting to transform Dune into a lush planet. Echoes of this pervade pragmatism, phenomenology, and transcendentalism, all of which say that we can craft both experiences and the places where we
live. Emerson, for instance, wrote, “Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. ... Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world. ... Build, therefore, your own world.”

Emerson’s proclamation is based on an idea that indigenous thinkers stress: humans aren’t fundamentally separate from nature. In fact, the original people of the Americas cultivated everything from the rainforest habitats of Brazil to the Great Plains of Canada and the United States, paralleling ecological transformations that are repeatedly initiated on Dune. Along comparable lines, the Fremen absorb Shai-hulud into their customs even though sandworms aren’t a native species. Inhabitants of the Great Plains similarly adopted non-native horses into their practical and cultural lives, so that the month of May became the Moon of shedding ponies and individuals took names like Crazy Horse and American Horse. Anne Waters carries on this tradition. This is because she’s also Jewish and incorporates this religion into her indigenous beliefs, just as Black Elk found no contradiction between Lakota spiritualism and the Catholic faith he later adopted. All of this together fits the indigenous idea, as Waters puts it, that “mind is part of an always changing nature, and hence is subject to all laws of nature,” and at the same time, “thinking humans have the capacity to change nature, including human nature.”

So, regardless of whether we have free will, we can enact enormous change. It’s a trope in the New Testament that faith can move mountains, and this is repeated by religious sages such as Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). The theme reoccurs in a Taoist text, where an old man wants to move mountains to make way for a road. When chastised about the infeasibility of the task, he replies: “My descendants will go on forever, but the mountains will get no bigger. Why should there be any difficulty about levelling it?”
This gets straight to the pragmatic point: we can move mountains, or end world poverty, or halt or accelerate climate change if we work collectively together long enough. Just think of the way the citizens of the Duniverse worked together to begin turning their planet back into a lush world, or consider Leto’s thirty-five hundred year quest to shatter his own prescient grip on galaxy. This is a core lesson that recurs throughout the *Dune* series.

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12 Whitt et al., “Belonging to Land,” 701-743


16 *Dune*, Ace, 3.

17 CD, Ace, 39.


20 James, “Sentiment of Rationality,” 319.


24 Dune, Ace, 509.

25 Dune, Ace, 268.


29 For example, Henry David Thoreau, Walden [1854], in Thoreau, Robert F. Sayre, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1985), 559.


31 Children of Dune, Ace, 269.

32 GED, Ace, 236.
33 GED, Ace, 581.

34 GED, Ace, 574.

35 GED, Ace, 303.

36 Whitt et al., “Belonging to Land,” 701-743.

37 Whitt et al., “Belonging to Land,” 702.


39 Whitt et al., “Belonging to Land,” 701-743.


41 William James, diary entry (April 30, 1870), quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1933), 323.


44 Mann, Ch. 8.

45 See DeMallie, The Six Grandfather Black Elk, 292, 322.


