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Leibniz and the Dreaming*

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Compared with the philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle, of Aquinas and Kant, of Berkeley and Bertrand Russell, the inherent and implied cosmologies and metaphysics of such preliterate peoples as the American Indians, the Polynesians, and the Australian Aboriginal people may not seem appropriately termed philosophical.

But if we were to compare the latter with the earliest recorded philosophical essays, such as those of Thales and Heraclitus, who found the first principle in water and fire respectively, we would realise that they were doing no more than what our so-called "primitive" philosophers do: they were looking for 'some one kind of existence out of which the diversity of the universe sprang, and some permanent ground at the back of the never-ending process of change.'[1]

From our point of view, the "primitive" attitudes towards existence were and are pre-scientific, and may not have been built into

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coherent systems of thought. Where, however, we have sufficient material, we recognise that primitive philosophy, though rudimentary, was the product of man's intellectual need for a system of some kind in his thought about things. We should remember that, just as the world about which modern thinkers philosophise is the world of human experience, so too the thought-world of Australian Aboriginal people is the world of their experience as they have seen it and as it has become intelligible to them. For philosophy 'begins in doubt and wonder, which disturb the peace of ignorance, and its goal is the peace of knowledge.'[2]

Philosophy, however, implies logical thought and the ability to think in general and abstract terms, and serious doubts have been expressed in the past about Aboriginal people's capacity in this regard. For example, the view was widespread that while they had words for countless varieties of trees, fish, snakes, birds and so on, they had no general term for tree, fish, snake and other creatures and objects. But in the first few weeks of my field work in the Kimberleys in 1927 I was recording such general terms, and none of my probing shook my informants. Actually, such terms had been published much earlier, in 1901 and 1903, for two north Queensland languages.[3] Likewise Aboriginal people use abstract terms, although, as it may seem to us, sparingly. They have linguistic mechanisms for making them, *e.g.* by using adjectives as such, or by adding suffixes to other word-forms, even as we say 'the good' or 'goodness'.[4]

As for their method of thinking, it seldom, if ever, seemed logical to settlers and pastoralists, for the background, the major premises, of Aboriginal thought was hidden from them. Moreover, few anthropologists were not influenced in some degree by the well-argued thesis of Lévy-Bruhl[5] that Aboriginal people, like other primitive peoples, were not only preliterate, but also prelogical. Mystical participation, not logical process as we know it, was the basis and tenor of their thinking.

But here again, I very quickly realised in my fieldwork that Aboriginal people explained and argued points by what were to me quite logical methods. I could and did disagree with their major premise,

but not with the inferences drawn from it. Indeed, a fieldworker must arrive at and appreciate their major premises if he is to gain their full cooperation and an understanding of their philosophy of life. Thus, granted a basic theory or doctrine of pre-existence of the souls or life-cells, or existence-potentials of all creatures and phenomena, beliefs and actions regarding human conception, the increase of natural species and phenomena, and the return of the soul after burial ritual to spirit-homes are quite logical inferences.

However deeply philosophical thought probes or scientific research takes us, we do not reach a stage when our world did not exist in some form. It was not preceded by nothing. So, too, Aboriginal thinkers take the world, including the earth beneath, and its counterpart—the sky above—as given. They have no myths recording its ultimate origin. It existed, but "without form and void", that is, without its present geographical form of hills and plains, rivers and springs, and void of living creatures.

Into this "waste" came heroes, the pioneering migrants, some in human form, some in animal form, and some with power of appearing in either form. Moreover, all, especially their leaders, had power to transform the landscape, and even to be transformed themselves into natural phenomena such as rocks and trees, which then became and remained the sacramental repository of pre-existent spirits and "life-cells" associated with the particular heroic figures.

Thus, myths and chants tell of heroes making country, making sandhills, trees, and living creatures, and making wells of water (by plunging sacred poles into the ground). But this making is not a creation out of nothing; the concept should be compared to the "making of man" in initiation. It is a transformation and a revealing of what already exists. Every sacred ritual is the lifting of 'the impenetrable veil of the non-appearing which lies behind the appearance which is the individual's own experience.' As Ashley-Montagu pointed out long ago, in initiation 'the essence of the non-appearing is made available' to the initiate.[6] It is this 'essence of the non-appearing', the *noumena* to use a Kantian term, which is summed up in the concept of the "Dreaming". This may be likened to the ἀρχή (*archē*), the sustaining ground of man and his universe.

The Aboriginal thinker tells me that a great snake moved across the country "making" the river, that is, leaving it as its track, and that out of the snake came people and other creatures. He adds quickly, "that Dreaming". By this, he does not mean that his narrative is just a story; nor is the Dreaming for him just a long-past period in a time series when landscape took on its present form and when life filled the void. It is rather the ever-present, unseen, ground of being—of existence. But it appears symbolically and becomes operative sacramentally in ritual.

This brings us to cosmology. The Aboriginal concept of their world is not a foreshadowing of a Leibnizian concept of a harmony pre-established at creation by God. According to Leibniz, the consistent development of everything is determined by preceding or efficient causes—a kind of chain reaction, but determined also by a final cause. For the Aboriginal philosopher or simple believer, the cosmos is the appearance in phenomena, inorganic and organic, of the Dreaming, which in itself does not become phenomena, but without which the latter would not be. Like the dreaming of sleep, it is not limited by considerations of space and time, for all space is here and all time is now. This of course reflects the urgency and immediacy of the food-gathering and hunting economy. Life consists not in building for a future, but revealing what is present, obtaining it, and coming to grips with it. Knowledge and technical skill are essential to do this, but even more so is ritual. Through this the presence of the Dreaming is realised, and its potency, such as was inherent in the cult-heroes, becomes operative and is revealed in the continuity of man, natural species, and phenomena.

The aspect of non-limitation by space or distance is illustrated by the doctrine that every part of a Dreaming being's body, be it human or animal, even if dismembered and scattered, is sacramentally that Dreaming with all its potency. We may see one limb here, another there, the head elsewhere, and so on, all changed to stone or earth or wood; but it is one and the same Dreaming or cult-being present fully in each case; not three or more beings, nor the same being, now here, now there.

Herein we see Aboriginal man coping with the problem of the one and the many, the particular and the universal. The Dreaming is universal, being the ground of every particular. Thus, every ritual, every particular Dreaming, every symbol, and indeed every situation is a part or expression of the whole; for as in Indian philosophy, 'every bit is filled with the same essential whole'.[7] As the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad reads: 'That is complete, this is complete; from the complete comes out the complete.'[8] So for the Aboriginal expositor, a certain site is Dreaming; the actors in the ritual are Dreaming; and so, too, are the sacred symbols. The Dreaming, however, is not divided into sub-Dreamings, few or many. Conversely, the Dreaming is not the total sum of all particular Dreamings added together, any more than time is the addition sum of all the yesterdays, nows and tomorrows. This is similar to the problem Bergson sought to solve by his concepts of time and duration.[9]

I am not trying to equate Aboriginal thinkers (and there are such) to Indian and Western philosophers, but I am suggesting that they have caught a glimpse of, and attempted to grapple with, similar, fundamental philosophical problems.

Thus, the Dreaming is not just a concept of time or of duration of the Eternal Now. It includes also that which occurs and the beings which exist. These particulars, however, exist in, and because of, the Dreaming. The latter is both the conditioning and the conditioned. The Dreaming also implies a unitary principle with an aspect of determinism. We may compare *Rta*, which in Indian scriptures is the unitary principle and 'the life force', not so much of particular phenomena in nature and in man, as of things in general. Moreover, it compels every creature and everything 'to follow the law of its own existence'. Thus arises the doctrine of Karma.[10] This aspect of determinism is accepted by Aboriginal people. In one region it is referred to as *djarp*. This is the road the individual must follow from birth to death. From it there is no escape. The important thing is to know it, for 'he who has no Dreaming is lost.'

The "particular" in Aboriginal religion is expressed in the many totemic, sky-hero and fertility-mother cults; and also in the doctrine of emanations and of the pre-existence of life-entities or souls, to-

gether with reincarnation. Here is an attempt to pose and answer the problem of the individual existence of living creatures and natural phenomena, not only in the beginning but in every generation and period. The answer seems to go deeper than animism with its ascription of dream-souls to all that is; deeper too than Lucretius' atomistic interpretation: 'The seeds of things in solid singleness, and each a single whole.'[11] The Aboriginal philosophers are rather on the Leibnizian track; for while Leibniz spoke of the self-sufficiency and isolation of every monad, *he added*: 'The ultimate ground of the monad's existence lies in Him who created it—in God.' The Aboriginal thinker would say that the ultimate ground of the existence of everything that is, lies in the Dreaming.[12]

Cosmology, however, is not only an exercise of thought; it bears on life and living. The food-gatherer and hunter depends intelligently on what nature provides. He is aware of the relationship in space and time, as we would say, of natural phenomena and happenings to the availability of foods and objects which he needs. Thus, the flowering of a tree in one place is the sign that yams are ready to be gathered elsewhere.

Over the generations, Aboriginal people have built up a systematic body of knowledge about the when and where of food sources and of the normal cycling of the seasons. But this knowledge is systematic because the world, the tribe's universe of thought and action, is a cosmos; that is, it is a system which can be taken for granted, while contingencies are a challenge which can be explained within the system.

A very significant aspect of this everyday cosmology is the way in which man and natural species and phenomena are considered parts of the one and same social, moral, and psychological order or structural system. Two observers, last century, recorded that in their regions Aboriginal people divided everything in heaven and earth between the two moieties of the tribe, and in 1928 I noted a similar, all-inclusive division in the Northern Kimberley. But that is not all: one function of totemism is to classify together in clans, in cult-groups, and in some areas in sections, both man and natural species and objects. Thus, one clan, named for example "kangaroo", in-

cludes a descent line of human beings and also some natural species and phenomena. All are kangaroo. This, however, is not merely a matter of structure and classification; it brings man and nature into one moral and psychological system. As man acts and reacts to man, so he acts and reacts towards natural species and phenomena of his own group and of other groups (or classes). Likewise, he interprets on similar lines the behaviour of natural species and objects as being directed towards himself.

According to the philosophy of totemism, man and all that exists not only have a common source in the Dreaming but also constitute a personalised system. Therefore, contingencies can be interpreted and met, and even forestalled, that is, through behaviour of a ritual or formalised pattern.

This leads to some consideration of Aboriginal categories of thought, starting with causation, for causation is inherent in problems raised by contingencies and by change. For *us*, causation implies a linkage of preceding events together with the total context of situations. Aboriginal people, however, look to personal and spiritistic and magical causes, seen or unseen, nearby or at a distance. And these causes are put in operation or are countered by ritual, *i.e.* by patterned, personal activity.

The pointing bone is a simple example: it is the transfer to the invisible of a visible missile, while this invisible object can be removed from the victim and made visible in ritual fashion by the "clever man". But the best illustration is that of totemic ritual which releases life-cells from a spirit-centre, a Dreaming, so that they may go forth and be born 'each after his kind'.[13] Thus, in this context causation is making the way (the road) for the unseen *noumena* to become visible. Similarly, the Aboriginal rainmaker never claims to make rain from a clear sky, but only releases the water from rain clouds, as do Council for Scientific and Industrial Research rainmakers.[14] Likewise, sexual intercourse is not the cause of conception as in our sense, but a preparing of the way, the road, for the entry of the pre-existing child to be incarnated.

But even more significant, especially from the point of view of assimilation and integration, are the Aboriginal categories of time and space, number, property, and ownership.

For persons of European descent, space and time are *our* space and *our* time, that is, concepts developed in "Western" thought. But we are apt to assume that they are essential features of the cosmos rather than categories of thought which enable us to interpret the world as a system in accord with our experiences and our purposes.

Other peoples with different cultural heritages, with different experiences and purposes, may conceive of space and time differently from ourselves. They do, as can be illustrated from, amongst others, American Indian and Australian Aboriginal thought.[15] This may surprise us, and certainly it can be frustrating in everyday affairs.

For us, time is an aspect of existence, stretching back from the present indefinitely in linear fashion, and similarly extending from the same present forward into a possibly unlimited future. Moreover, the present, however we define it, *e.g.* by the moment, or the year, or the generation, quickly becomes past time. It is but a step on an ever-moving escalator, while time itself is a necessary aspect of change and causation. Change implies a movement from a past, however near, to a present, or from a present to a future which almost immediately, if not simultaneously, is the present.

The most striking feature of *our* time, however, is that it is measured by a process of accurate division and subdivision from millennia to seconds and parts of seconds. The steps of the time escalator are calculated and their speed of movement determined. Mathematics and science use this time scale for interpretation, appreciation and prediction, and the world of everyday affairs is set to it. We are subject to an all-embracing system of chronology. We are born and grow up, work and travel, and eventually die (statistically) according to timetables. And we accept all this as essential for social and economic order, and even for health.

Aboriginal people, however, do not understand our attitude. 'White man…him always worry.' The white man has to get something done or to arrive somewhere in a fixed time, and he frets and fumes if something prevents him from doing so. He fumes all the more if his Aboriginal workers are not on time or do not reach his target of work on time. To the Aboriginal, this is needless 'worry'.

The time to finish a task is when it is finished, and the time to arrive at a place is when he arrives. The workman might have a sleep "on the job", *e.g.* making a spear or wooden dish, as I frequently saw, but that is part of the process. The traveller rests in the shade during the hot midday hours, or spends a day on the way hunting, if opportunity occur, for this is nomadic living. Groups summoned by messengers to a "big meeting" for rituals seem to us to move exasperatingly slowly. They arrive in dribs and drabs, but both they and the "host" group are quite nonchalant about this. No precise date is or could be fixed. The visitors have to hunt for, and to gather, their daily food on the way, probably turning aside here and there in order to do so. The "host" group and the visiting groups who have arrived do not grumble about waiting. They go on living: hunting, food-gathering, rehearsing ritual, and having corroborees. The others will come.

The anthropologist, whose time in the field is limited, may worry about what, to him, is a delay, but no one else worries. There *is* no delay.

Over forty years ago near the tip of Dampier Land Peninsula, north of Broome, a very fine Aboriginal man invited me to meet a group of men at a certain secret place to be shown sacred emblems and to hear the associated chanting. An approximate time was arranged by indicating the position of the sun. He called for me, but when we reached the spot not a soul was there. He was not disturbed. To my enquiries, he said simply that the men would come. They did. They drifted in.

Mrs A.Y. Hassell of Esperance Bay, Western Australia, writing between 1860 and 1880, recognised the difference between ourselves and Aboriginal people concerning the concept of time. A young couple were going off on holiday from her homestead. They said they would return 'before the snakes went to sleep', but she just wondered, because when Aboriginal people start 'to wander it is often two or three years before they return. *For they take no account of the time*.' That is, of course, our chronological time. When they return, they do not consider an explanation necessary for being away two or three years longer than the white person might have expected.

In 1946, I paid an unplanned and completely unexpected visit to the Forrest River Mission, Northern Kimberley, travelling by plane from Darwin to Wyndham and thence by launch up the river. This was 18 years after my period of fieldwork there in 1928. Walking up to the Superintendent's house, I felt a tap on my shoulder and looking around saw to my surprise the "headman" of 1928, aged but still active, as well as several younger men. An hour or so later a message came for me to go that night to the camp outside the mission village as the men had something to show me. I went, joined a small ring of men, and saw an act by one performer. I was then told that I should cross the river next morning to go to a ritual place with a number of companions. On arrival, I saw several "old men" chanting under a storehouse for *maiaŋari*, sacred boards, bull-roarer in shape. About 70 of these were fixed upright mainly in a U-formation. I sat nearby in a "shade", as dancers in turn pulled up a *maiaŋari* and carried it with two hands and running towards me placed it, pointing east, in front of me.[16]

The significance of this episode was the immediate disappearance of the 18 years that had passed since my previous visit. It seemed to me, and they acted as though it were so to them, that that gap did not exist. It was just "next" day. Chronological distance did not exist. I had appeared again, just as one or more of their absent tribesmen do, and we went ahead. 'They take no account of time'—*our* time.

Underlying this attitude to time is the Aboriginal concept of "The Dreaming" to which reference has been made when discussing cosmology. Man and natural phenomena do not exist *now*, and events do not happen *now*, as a result of a chain of causal events and conditions extending back to a long-past period—a "Dreamtime", a beginning. They exist and they happen because that Dreamtime is also here and now. It is the Dreaming, the condition or ground of existence. The concept is not of a "horizontal" line extending back chronologically through a series of "pasts", but rather of a "vertical" line in which *the* past underlies and is within the present. As the top of an iceberg is seen and is powerful because of its great unseen mass moving beneath the surface, so man and nature are sustained

by the ever-present, latent power of the Dreaming. And Aboriginal man expresses this concept and this belief in his ritual, mythology, and symbolism, through which the Dreaming becomes sacramentally visible and potent. He believes that through ritual the normal cycles and processes of natural phenomena and of man are assured.

Aboriginal people do recognise a past as distinct from the immediacy of today, but it is not a past which is gone for ever. Indeed, it does not extend back far. Father's father is older and more "learned", but he is present; he is in many tribes classified as elder brother. Further, members of great grandfather's generation do exist for some young persons, possibly as old "fathers", or old "uncles", but no thought is given to generations further back. The individual, still pre-existing in his Dreaming place, could not know those who died before his incarnation. Whoever they were, they are either just gone, or else will be reincarnated. So why worry!

To conclude: A striking, if not the basic, difference in the epistemological concepts of Western and Aboriginal thought lies in the presence or absence respectively of measuring and numbering by units in linear order. In the West, *e.g.* length, size, age, and the time required to do or make something or to go somewhere are factors to be measured in determining the number of monetary units to be involved. But such considerations are absent from the Aboriginal living-by-the-day nomadic, food-gathering economy. To subdivide, subtract, and add numerically are unnecessary and irrelevant.

On the other hand, Aboriginal people find the cause and explanation of all that is in the ontological concept of the Dreaming. Therefore, a series of causal factors and situations is not sought. That something is Dreaming or, as in parts of eastern Australia, that the sky cult hero 'Baiame say so' is sufficient explanation. And there we leave the matter.

Notes

1 A.K. Rogers, *A Student's History of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 12.

2 *Synkrētic* – Elkin misattributes this to Edward Caird. See Thomas Hill Green, 'Review of Edward Caird, *Philosophy of Kant'*, in *Works of Thomas Hill Green*, Vol. 3, ed. R.L. Nettleship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 131.

3 W.E. Roth, *North Queensland Ethnography Bulletin*, No. 2 ('Kokoyimidir Language', with the help of Missionaries G.H. Schwarz and W. Poland); and No. 6 ('Nggerikudi Language', Missionary N. Hey, revised and edited by W.E. Roth).

4 See, for example, J. Gunther, 'The Wiradhari Dialect', in Appendix (pp. 64-05) to *An Australian Language*, ed. by J. Fraser, Sydney, 1892. T.G.H. Strehlow, *Aranda Phonetics and Grammar,* Oceania Monograph, No. 7 (Sydney: Australian National Research Council, 1944), 61-64, 69-71; and for generic terms in the Aranda language, *idem.* 64.

5 *Synkrētic* – Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think: Les Fonctions Mentales dans les Sociétés Inférieures* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018).

6 Ashley Montagu, *Coming into Being among the Australian Aborigines* (London: Routledge, 1937), 336.

7 Shri Krishna Saksena, *Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy* (Benares: Nand Kishore & Bros., 1944), 14.

8 Saksena, *Nature of Consciousness*, 14.

9 H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, transl. A. Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914). Also, Harald Höffding, *Modern Philosophers*, transl. A.C. Mason (London: Macmillan, 1915).

10 Saksena, *Nature of Consciousness*, 15-16; S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1924), 120.

11 T. Lucreti Cari, *De Rerum Natura*, Book II, lines 157, 159.

12 I suggested above that Aboriginal cosmology does not foreshadow the Leibnizian concept of 'pre-established harmony' through the working of preceding or efficient causes. Here, I suggest that there is similarity in the Leibnizian concept of an ultimate ground of the monad's existence, and the Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming. A useful exposition of the philosophy of Leibniz is given by John Theodore Merz, *Leibniz* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1884), Part II, 148-151, 160-164.

13 *Synkrētic* – Elkin is alluding to Genesis 1:11: 'And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit *after his kind*, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.'

14 *Synkrētic* – The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) was the precursor to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Australia's government-funded scientific research agency.

15 John Collier, *On the Gleaming Way* (Denver: Sage Books, 1962), 15-21; A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1964), 233.

16 Compare the dancer carrying a ritual pointed board in Kurangara ritual at the Sale River, Northern Kimberley, 1938. See Helmut Petri, *Sterbende Welt in Nordwest-Australien* (Braunschweig: Albert Limbach, 1954), Tafel XIVa.