Australian Aboriginal Philosophy

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There is nothing in Australian Aboriginal cultures that is remotely similar to what we in Western European societies call 'philosophy'. However, it is possible to extract what might be called a 'folk philosophy' from the sophisticated systems of practical knowledge that enabled the indigenous peoples of Australia to live and thrive for many thousands of years in a mostly hostile and isolated environment. It is worth remembering that the Aborigines, who arrived in Australia more than 50,000 years ago, had populated every region of this vast country long before the European 'invasion' and had invented elaborate forms of kinship relations, hunter-gatherer economies and systems of dispute resolution. They also developed some 200 variant languages with novel grammatical structures. In many Aboriginal communities today people speak three or four distinct languages, including special languages used in ritual contexts.

This rich body of practical rationality was enmeshed in intricate, quasi-religious bodies of myths, symbols, rites and ceremonies about the coming-into-being of the cosmos, the appearance of humans, human sexuality and reproduction, the lands or terrains the Aborigines occupied, the existence of evil, death and life after death.

A number of anthropologists, for example A.P. Elkin (1891-1975), T.G.H. Strehlow (1908-1978) and especially W.E.H. Stanner (1905-1982), have attempted to show how a rudimentary 'philosophy' might be constructed out of that body of mythological material. Thus Stanner has argued that the philosophical gist, so to speak, of the 'creation' myths is that the world is meaningful in the sense that it can be understood and shows a 'beneficial intent' toward us (Stanner 1998: 2). In other words, the world about us is a cosmos and not a chaos governed by capricious and malevolent powers. In the same way, the philosophical gist of the 'spirit conception' myths of indigenous Australians is that the human person is a compound of a body and a non-bodily element and has an intrinsic value. The 'Dreaming' stories are also linked with the egalitarian ethos of Aboriginal peoples and their resistance to any form of monarchical structures. In addition, there is a 'life-force' animating the world and the terrain or 'country' of particular groups, which conserves and renews life in all of its forms and which can, so to speak, be tapped into and drawn upon by those groups.

Again, the folk philosophical correlate of the elaborate mythology of the 'Dreaming' is that there is a 'Law' or spiritual authority which expresses the sacred traditions of a particular people and imposes them on its members. While it is misleading to make comparisons with Western European moral philosophy, one might say very tentatively that the indigenous peoples of Australia are quasi-Kantians in their reverence for the moral 'Law'.

Finally, the Dreaming can be seen as an attempt to symbolise the connection of the metaphysical beginning or 'ground' of things and the here-and-now world of our experience. Thus, Elkin has suggested that, in cosmological terms, the Dreaming is the "ever-present, unseen ground of being, of existence", and that there are analogies between the mythical thinking of the Aborigines and the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers (Elkin 1969). On the other hand, Stanner is sceptical about this approach and he reminds

us that Aboriginal cultures had no literate tradition of the kind that was available to the pre-Socratics and no "self-conscious intellectual detachment towards the myths." From the Western European side also, Stanner says, our understanding of Aboriginal myths is limited by "our abysmal ignorance of the deeper semantics of Aboriginal languages, including the secret languages often used by ritualists" (Stanner 1998: 22). One might add that we also know very little about the connections between Aboriginal myths and the pictorial art startlingly displayed in the recent Aboriginal painting of Emily Kngwarreye, Rover Thomas, Paddy Bedford, Linda Syddick and many other indigenous artists.

Quite apart from these interpretations of Aboriginal systems of myths, there have been a number of recent attempts to see the Dreaming in ecological terms akin to the 'Gaia hypothesis' of James Lovelock, who views the universe as a living and self-regulating system. Deborah Bird Rose's book, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australia* (1992), is an excellent example of this approach. A similar view of the Dreaming has been proposed by Heather McDonald (2002), who argues that Aboriginal religions are wholly centred upon the land and that it is literally from the land, the terrain on which a particular group lives, that its members derive their spiritual values. Indeed, one philosopher has characterised Aboriginal thinking as 'geosophical' (Swain 1993).

It is obvious that the rudimentary Aboriginal 'folk philosophy' just described will not help contemporary philosophers in solving problems about human consciousness, the foundations of ethics, or metaphysical issues about 'what there is'. The question then arises: Why study Aboriginal thinking when it is clearly incommensurable with what we call 'philosophy'? One answer is that the study of Aboriginal 'philosophy' brings home to us that philosophy, as we heirs of the Greeks know it, is a cultural invention or construction that was born out of a set of material and cultural circumstances in the small city-state of Athens some 2500 years ago, and was by good fortune precariously sustained and developed in the Middle Ages through its interaction with Christianity and Islam, and later through its dialectical relationship with the natural sciences. Again, we need to remind ourselves that, like the indigenous Australians, most past civilisations have got along quite successfully and happily without philosophy as we know it.

References

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