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Abstract

Threatened aboriginal cultures provide valuable criteria for fruitful criticism of the dominant Western cultural paradigm and perceptual model, which many take for granted as the inevitable path for humankind to follow. However, this Western model has proven itself to be imprecise and limiting. It obscures fundamental aspects of human nature, such as the mythical, religious dimension, and communication with the Cosmos. Modern technology, high-speed communication and mass media affect our ability to perceive reality and respond to it. Non-Western worldviews could help us to regain meaningful communication with Nature and to learn new ways of perceiving our world.

Introduction

The survival of aboriginal communities is at the same time an old and a new battle. It is old, because it has been cloaked for many years in the garb of a conflict that has long since been resolved, at least from the perspective of the conquering cultures, and very modern because, since the foregoing assumption is patently false, it may turn out that a significant part of the solution to the fundamental problems arising from perceptual fragmentation, the inconsistency of moral values and the Western model's loss of meaning, could be derived from a thorough review of the philosophical principles and social values of certain indigenous life systems as coherent cultural models.

Contrary to popular belief, the situation of most aboriginal communities in the world has been precarious indeed, especially over the last few decades. Professor Bernard Nietschmann wrote, referring to the year 1987, that "of the world's 120 military conflicts, three quarters involve the struggle of native peoples to keep themselves separate or free from the occupation of larger Nation-States."¹

The drastic reduction of territory and the devastation of the sustainable foundation of many highly distinctive communities, peoples and nations at the hands of oligopolitical interests that seek to exploit their resources or at the hands of national States that try to assimilate them into mainstream, hardly represent late-breaking news. Nor is it a mystery that these communities display a certain decay of traditions, myths and customs resulting from exposure to violently persuasive electronic media and communication systems. Paradoxically, the impact of these elements jeopardizes epistemic templates for making sense of reality that could turn out to be crucial for sorting out the confusion that the present and future generations will be facing.

This brief essay is an exercise in philosophical reflection on the idea of being human in this day and age, with an inspiration in the survival of these cultural templates of knowledge. It tries to use a different

approach, and set up a modest body of basic ideas that will serve to refresh the criticism of the Western paradigm that significant thinkers of the most diverse disciplines (ethnologists, historians, sociologists and psychologists, among others) have undertaken over the course of the 20th century. The purpose is to take a close look at the path modern humans are taking, more and more blindly, and to discuss the need to reinsert ourselves into our into the natural scale that we belong to.

Humans as archetypical beings rooted in Nature

Anything that the human race undertakes necessarily follows an archetypical evolutionary structure that keeps human beings from voluntarily forsaking their mythical or magical state. For this reason, among the myriad needs that drive humans to act and go forward, there is necessarily some kind of religious sense, that leads them unquestionably toward a conception of God.² The fact that that god nowadays has been replaced in the eyes of many by ideas of grandeur, a thirst for power or the desire to buy a new car every year, doesn't mean that the basic human need is not there.

Over the course of their lives, human beings look for ways to fill in the empty spaces that are rooted in their yearning for the divine. At every moment of their existence, individuals are looking for substitutes to satisfy a craving that they cannot explain. If people are left without their fundamental motivations—youth, power, sex, work, money, status, children, etc.—they inevitably collapse in one way or another. Some individuals even *die*, when their fundamental life *undertaking* comes to an end. They have *nothing* else to do, in their worldview.

“You have said it, man listened to Pythia and sought a meaning that was necessarily beyond the first impressions that the words made on him. The Greek saw the sibyl trying to discern Apollo's designs: she would hear a sign and look for its meaning, she would receive words and examine them until they revealed an oracle.”³ Nowadays it no longer works that way. It is inherent to human beings to feel dissatisfied, or satisfied for a moment and then to resume the search for the divine.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that human beings are natural beings. By being a part of everything, they are a part of Nature. Individuals may or may not know that there is nothing foreign to Nature, but in the end, their awareness of the matter is irrelevant, since the link to Nature is so inexorably radical. Some people act, and they might understand. Others act and they might not understand. Not that they interpret things as chaos, they just don't understand how they work. For example, what happens to city dwellers? They lose consciousness of themselves, of their natural function and of the fact that the very construction of cities is driven by the outside world. They forget that everything that happens, or that happens to them, is decided and driven by Nature.

Urban dwellers might manage to realize that ants exist, that they make holes in the ground and that they tend to make them in certain places. However, it's unlikely that urban dwellers ever think of the purpose of this action for their surroundings. The reason for the holes that ants make may be to allow the land to absorb rainfall more easily, thus replenishing the groundwater. Urban dwellers obviously won't understand why land, where ants have been exterminated, is infertile. In other words, these people have a very hard time understanding how the ecological web works.

Another example is the water hyacinth in Lake Chapala in Mexico. We all think that it's a weed run amok, when the truth is that one of its functions is to filter heavy metals. Many of the solutions still being proposed address the issue of how to get it out of the water, how to get rid of it. But this is not the

right approach. The problem won't be solved by removing the water hyacinths from the water, but by removing the heavy metals.

There's a lovely story about brier (which is the plant that forms small bushes and often represents that first vegetation to grow in inhospitable places). It might seem to be an uninteresting, worthless plant. But brier creates shade in very hot locales. Goats don't eat it, but they deposit their droppings on it, which serves to fertilize the ground. In time, brier patches improve and turn into productive land that attracts clouds and rain. The land improves as a result of an external force working on it. This cycle is destroyed when brier is simply weeded out.

Technological marvels, cosmological ignorance

One thing must be borne in mind: human beings are immersed in the Cosmos. They depend on the Cosmos and they can't extract themselves from it. For example, our sun is a dwarf star. While the Earth revolves—as all the planets do—to the right, the solar system as a whole moves to the left toward Hercules and the star called Vega, which in turn have a descending movement. What are we getting at?

Sometimes we think that human beings are above all this infinity. But it's absurd to think this way. Each level of the system has rigorous gravitational laws that are impossible to upset even if we wanted to. People (their astral and mental body, including their soul), simply cannot avoid interacting according to these laws. Why is it that an urban settlement that produces nothing but din and chaos during the day, at night looks like embroidered velvet when contemplated from afar? Could it be mere coincidence that the arrangement of lights corresponds to identifiable constellations? Or is the reason that human beings' instincts—much the same as ants' instincts—impel them to congregate in cities and to be unconscious reproducers of stellar positions? The sad thing is that human beings, perhaps much the same as ants, seem to have lost track of their instincts.

"They were there, they asked all the questions, they saw it with their own eyes, but they never found out what was really happening, and they never found out that they hadn't found out. Interpretations, from the point of view of Western thinking, can never project more than reflections of the very same Western thinking projected outward and then taken as reality."⁴

People no longer have the capacity the Greeks had to comprehend a number and its qualitative relation with other numbers. Rarely do they distill qualitative situations from their reading. Unlike ants, human beings have consciousness. Are there individuals who have learned to identify—wherever they happen to be—the luminous frequency of that embroidered velvet we mentioned? Mirdad would say, "...man is a god in diapers, and time is a diaper. Space is a diaper and flesh is a diaper. In the same way, all the senses are diapers as well as all things perceived by them. Mothers know that the diapers are not the baby. But the baby doesn't..."⁵

There are holy roads like the road to Santiago de Compostela in Spain; when one examines them on a map, it is possible to verify that they line up with an inverted copy of Virgo. We can't help but wonder what kind of Astrology the builders of the past used, when nowadays the discipline's field of study is supposedly limited to the influence of the planets that are close to Earth. Could there be another, wider discipline? We don't know. And we don't much care either, not even present-day urban planners.

Nonetheless, we're convinced of one thing: there must be a constant exchange of energy flows between

the Earth and the Cosmos. An exchange that in the end explains and decides all urban layouts. The earth, in turn, may possibly return energy in the form of holographic light, which lets two objects exchange energy. Might the Universe be a constant play of heat and movement that necessarily involves the Earth?

Whatever human beings do ends up being technology. That's why technology should be understood as the extension of one or more senses, which once developed, modify what human beings have before them: their world. Therefore, what we see as technology expresses another form of being.

Technology at present is setting up changes that alter human beings' vital conditions in a profound way. Aside from these transformations, environmental stimuli and demands have been imbued with an unprecedented rhythm and acceleration; it is beyond doubt that the human psyche, particularly human senses, perception, imagination and will have been affected by the rich and varied pressure of the environment thus transformed, and by the need for continuous response to this pressure.

Unfortunately, the inroads that new technology is making, come at a price. Technology is becoming more and more immediate, chaotic and disturbing. There are no filters to block patently harmful technologies, since they are generally launched by those who stand to gain the most from their implementation.⁶

Fleeting Apprehension versus Direct Knowledge

The communication phenomenon is outside the domain of these laws. Why? Because the communication media offer us artificial stimuli and these artificial stimuli are defining the new simulated culture born of mass media. "Each culture creates its own sensorial range according to the demands of its surroundings."⁷ So the perceptual possibilities of each individual in the West are conditioned by a culture that is being sculpted by mass media. However, "even though each sensorial experience releases a certain amount of sensorial energy, the distribution of this energy among the five senses varies according to the medium that is utilized."⁸

Maybe the best way to summarize what is happening is with a simplistic formula: the greater the volume and speed of data, the greater the ignorance and indifference regarding the reality. How much can a person really *know*, for example, of the highway to Chapala if he or she makes the trip by car three times a week for ten years? $52 \text{ weeks} \times 3 = 156 \times 10 = 1560$ trips. How much can a person *learn* if he or she makes the trip once on foot? In the first case, it would be impossible to come up with any kind of narrative for a travelogue, but in the second case it would be easy. This is the perceptual difference in images when things are played at high speed.

The mass media increase speed because they are extensions of the human person. If we say "How much is 23×72 ?" and then do the calculation, we will realize that even though the procedure is slower, we are capable of obtaining the logarithms that lead us to the result: 1456. In other words, we are able to know number, logarithms and result with certainty. We don't obtain the same knowledge with a calculator, because it doesn't show us the components of each operation, only the result.

The characteristic fascination of the image of today's world comes from its immediacy.

"The immediacy of images as a representation of the world and of beings is what produces a direct shock to the image consumer's affectivity and sensitivity. Images offer us concrete, real-life information in a variety of forms. In the presence of images, perception, intuition and

affectivity shift into gear before the personality control mechanisms are even ready to receive intentional messages. Images end up taking over the person in his or her own sub-conscious. Driven at all times and everywhere by the immediacy of images and sounds, human beings have become satisfied consumers of the fascination of images.”⁹

One of Marshall McLuhan’s seminal contributions to the theory of knowledge is that tribal societies have a *global vision* of their world.¹⁰ The integration with their surroundings is absolute. They have no extension speed, i.e., they have no prolonged sense, which leads us to suspect something very important: to the extent that individuals use technology to increase the extension speed of their senses, they are left detached from the Cosmos.

On the other hand, in spite of having so many obstacles arrayed against them, indigenous and tribal communities all over the world have survived thanks to their own dialectic of hierophanies, to their inclination toward repeating indefinitely a series of archetypes in order to adopt the same paradoxical sacralization of reality over and over again *ad infinitum*. “All is said in the most elemental hierophany: the manifestation of the sacred in a 'rock' or a 'tree' is no less mysterious or less worthy than that same manifestation in a 'god'. The process of sacralizing reality is the same: the only difference is the *form* taken by this process in the person’s consciousness.”¹¹

Human beings discover that upon entering a cave, they can do things that the weather outside doesn’t let them do. So, when they can’t find caves, they make them. The most archaic dwellings constructed by human beings revolve around fire as the life-principle. They are circular, emulating the way the planets revolve around the sun. Human beings intuit that fire produces life and that this life communicates them with God. For the same reason, the structure of many primitive or tribal dwellings takes on a geometrically conic shape; the roofs point toward infinity and store energy; there is no visual or tactile step; it becomes what the senses perceive. The spatial layout reflects the world model more closely.

Western culture has not been able to subdue these peoples. There are many cultural traditions and horizons, something that suggests a different scale of communication with God and the environment. The interconnection that appears to be common to all is respect for the Earth, which keeps the ecological question intact.

It must seem crazy to the indigenous peoples of the Americas to profess devotion for a Christ that no one sees or whose teachings were and continue to be passed on by individuals who never knew him. In spite of religious syncretism, many of these peoples know and experience the divine directly. They talk with fire, with the air, with the earth; with animals, plants, mountains, rivers, lakes, etc. We, in our limited way of looking at things, tend to study and classify this kind of experience as a type of animism that doesn’t define any kind of hierarchy to distinguish among the things that make up the world.

For these peoples, a return to the natural function is a return to God; the only thing that they can possibly consider as an existential motivation is to undertake the mandatory interpretation of surrounding phenomena. This interpretation becomes a day-to-day exercise in links, insertions and matches with the surroundings that ends up integrating each action or relation into a model full of congruence and meaning.

What appears to be conceptual poverty of primitive cultures implies, not an inability to make theory, but rather a style of thinking that is absolutely distinct from the modern ‘style’ based

on the efforts of Hellenistic speculation. We are able to identify, even among the groups that are the least evolved from an ethnographic point of view, a set of truths integrated into a coherent, a theory. This set of truths does not make up a *Weltanschauung*, but rather a pragmatic ontology (we could even say a soteriology), in the sense that with the help of these 'truths', [primitive humans, SIC] try to save themselves by integrating themselves into reality.¹²

It needs to be emphasized that the human person is the one being that must develop him or herself by interacting constantly with Nature. There is no Teacher. To the degree that the perception of the senses corresponds to another order, the only individuals capable of experiencing Nature are those that are immersed in that resonance frequency. In Mesoamerican communities, for example, many of the most ancient oral traditions, rites and ceremonies revolve around an expression of reverence for the one person who can re-establish and assure the balance of this Order: the old Fire God.

Human activities, social roles and orders, on the other hand, exist in a hierarchy. Shamans, for example, do not inherit their position, nor do they arise by spontaneous generation. Community recognition comes from that special quality developed by a person who achieves full interaction and communication with Nature. Only when the person is capable of talking with fire and the rest of the elements of Nature, can he or she then exercise the shaman's power.

Among the world's other aboriginal peoples, the gods, roles and language may vary according to different hierophanies and perceptual models, which consequently give rise to different cosmologies. However, the religious articulation with the Earth, its natural elements and the ways of interacting with its laws appear to be held in common. There are no deviations, no wear and tear, no contradictions on the level of real experience. A relationship is cultivated, as well as an explanation and a balance, which are always in line with the possibilities offered by the environment and with the survival of the species. Obviously, there is no pollution, no physical or moral contamination.

This ability to communicate with Nature on the part of indigenous communities, remits us to a language and a kind of learning that we have lost over the years. Many of these peoples know that by learning the different expressions of the civilizing model, they acquire no feasible alternative for the future. This is now confirmed: these peoples *know* that we are committing suicide. They look at our artificial disconnection and the moral decay of our societies and see self-deception, insane behavior.

Alternatives

Although there are many perception models, in the West we have enthroned just one model, which explains why the interpretive scope and the meaning of phenomena tend to be very poor. This becomes evident to a person who has freedom of perception or a widened perception. "If we see perception as the organism's immediate response to the energies that excite the sensory organs, which implies that all perception is an organic response, then educating perception must consist of making these immediate responses more closely related to the object of perception."¹³

Here it might be worth reflecting on the possibility of attempting a thorough revision of this model, in view of the fact that the sustaining pillars—the attempt to give a single interpretation to each phenomenon, and the effective control of nature—have been undermined by the chaos theory and new mathematical findings about fractals: "We are just beginning to understand that chaos and

unpredictability are more deeply embedded in nature than we ever imagined... Most of the natural world does not conform easily to linear equations. Nonlinear, fractal forms are the rule rather than the exception."¹⁴

Might it then be feasible to question the Western approach on the basis of perceptual formulas that conceive of *reconnection* from a non-Western focus? And if it were, what would this questioning imply? Could it be an involutory aberration?

But let's take things calmly. Since we now have more evidence that the indigenous communities have been misunderstood, now is the time, on the one hand, to admit maturely that by any yardstick, many of them display a *civilizing* horizon that is much better integrated than our model. So, once the battle in defense of otherness is over, the next step could be well-founded cultural attempts to preserve the knowledge contained in these ancient models, disentangling the perceptual ability and the most effective and transferable qualitative features of these cultures for contemporary society.

Today, the solutions applied by many peoples and communities to everyday human problems reveal unique advantages over our world, in the most varied situations (political, economic, social, psychosocial, moral, etc.). For example, among many semi-nomadic peoples, the younger the children, the stronger the community spirit: all the children receive protection from all the adults. All male adults are called father and all women, mother; all help out teaching and taking care of the children. Violence is inconceivable and therefore, there is no crime rate.

Obviously we're talking about very different ways of approaching reality, social intercourse, transmission of information and preservation of species and resources. So to consider this route for a complex and decentralized world like the West, would require not only genuine recognition, but also a very high level of assimilatory capacity and individual and collective transformation.

The particular situation of modern-day human beings hinges primarily on the fact that the most powerful and refined information technologies coincide with reappearance of elemental, intuitive forces that civilization has tried to keep down and disguise for millennia. It's as if human beings, as they approach the high point of their power, are forced to reconcile themselves with their deeper nature and to rediscover the original unity of their intelligence and their instinct.¹⁵

In this regard it would be wise to look more deeply into the deterministic transcendence of the other alternative, which becomes all the more acute given the acceleration of change in the technological setting of the contemporary world. We wonder whether it is Nature itself that is increasing this acceleration rhythm. And if it is, what will be the impact on a person who is completely cornered, with no freedom to choose what he or she does? Shouldn't we look for other ways out, aside from the one sketched here, in order to avoid the worst-case scenario?

Mircea Eliade warned, over 40 years ago:

The different types of civilization are organically linked to certain religious forms, but this does not in the least rule out spontaneity and, in the final analysis, the anti-historical condition of religious life, because all of history in a certain sense is a fall from the sacred sphere: a limitation and a diminishment. The sacred continues to make itself felt, however, and in each

new manifestation it reassumes its initial tendency to reveal itself totally and fully... This is the same as saying that for certain religious consciences in crisis, a historical leap is always possible that will let them reach positions that would otherwise be inaccessible.¹⁶

What has happened to human beings' senses as a result of current technology? It is easy to observe that they have been trained to perceive objects at a greater speed, although not fast enough yet to make the leap from one perceptual dimension to another. Even when we have precise control over an iterative process, we cannot predict its effects at any specific place or time.

The idea gives hope, however, as Nicolis and Prigogine wrote:

More and more scientists have come to think, as we do, that many fundamental processes shaping nature are irreversible and stochastic; that the deterministic and reversible laws describing the elementary interactions may not be telling the whole story. This leads to a new vision of matter, one no longer passive, as described in the mechanical worldview, but associated with spontaneous activity. This change is so deep that we believe we can truly speak of a new dialogue of man with nature.¹⁷

Until we run up against a time limit, it might be feasible to appreciate two dimensions at the same time: one, the dimension of the isolated phenomenon; two, the dimension of the insertion of its value in the overall meaning.

Are we then in a sort of transition? That is to say, in the midst of a transformation so profound and accelerated that the senses are forced to retract in the face of technological stimuli, as in the case of the computer, where people actually stop investing the time to learn how to use it more effectively? Along this line of thought, we should therefore interpret that human beings—who find themselves immersed in a process of rapid change—should shut down part of their consciousness in order to have a chance to breathe and cope with the ever-increasing speed imposed by everyday life.

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