

## **Western Thinking and its roots – Indigenous Thinking and its roots.**

Barbara Hadkinson 13 May, 2015

What I am presenting today is material which may help us to open a way towards better understanding of the way Aboriginal people understand life compared with the way we do. I'll try to elucidate the difference in the fundamental assumptions from which we start and the fundamental assumptions from which they start. If you are like me you find Dreamtime Stories fairly difficult to grasp as a basic set of premises out of which to find meaning, except seeing many of them as moral tales of how to live. Or perhaps we see them as great stories but mere myth..

We are all aware that there are various ways of behaving in the world. We meet it when we come in touch with people of other cultures and see practices and customs with which we are entirely unfamiliar in our daily lives. For example the Maori Haka, a way of generating courage to enter a fight; or eating with you hands (using the right hand only), in some parts of India; or slurping soup in Korea which shows how much you appreciate the food; or burying people in trees as practised in some parts of Australia. These can be classified as different ways of doing things, usually defined as culture. You do this but we do that. Then we look for the influences and traditions which may have brought out these different behaviours in different societies.

But there are not only different ways of behaving but also different ways of knowing. It is that which is being explored here.

In our society we have been brought up to attribute high value to rationality. We call it logic. Critical to this way of thinking is to define the categories of things you are referring to as explicitly as you can. So you learn to be explicit. So what you mean by an “apple” has characteristics which are not the same as those of an “orange”. However, in another context, they can be categorised together as “fruit”. In the words of formal logic we are clear what is “A” and what is “not-A” This is to avoid confusion and error making your argument and in our way of problem solving.

Logic, for which we in the West can thank Socrates and Plato from about 500 BCE, has contributed fundamentally to our ability to develop our positivistic science which works by drilling down to the smallest components of matter. Once this was down to the atom, but now it is down to electrons, neutrons etc. and even further to quarks etc It enables a certain way of problem solving to flourish. The use of logic has also had a large part in shaping our Western systems of law and governance. We have a lot to be thankful for this Greek contribution to our civilization.

Prior to this abstract intellectual development and its concomitant panoply of Sky

Gods in Greek mythology, there was the understanding of life that focused on nature and the life-affirming miracle of fertility, pictured in thought-form of the Greeks as Earth Gods., retained to some extent at Delphi.

Here I see the connection to Aboriginal thinking. In "The Wisdom of the Elders" the authors state: "Embodied in the Dreaming Laws, (the Aboriginal people see that) theirs is a role of perpetual human protection, maintenance, and renewal of the entire natural world and respectful dialogue with its kindred membership.

"Wisdom of the Elders" by Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki P40

Notice we have here two ways of thinking, one of which lies in human beings seeing themselves as part of all the systems of life in the material form and the other seeing themselves as having a separateness from the material in the intellectual. Descartes has been given the recognition for creating the body/mind split, by summing up his ideas as "I think, therefore I am." In fact he was putting a seal on the body/mind split which emerged with the Greek philosophers. It seems as though it took 2000 years for this split to be acknowledged for what it is.

This is where I venture into the area of New Science or Quantum physics. In this I have gleaned the basic conceptualisations on which it lies, not a working knowledge of the physics itself. I am only trying to deal with the philosophy of Quantum physics.

Newtonian Physics is based on logic in the operation of things of our existence. It gets us to the moon etc. Quantum Physics takes us into a different sphere where Newtonian Physics is out of its depth. In Quantum Physics, which is at the level of infinitesimally small, or the micro, scientists have been taken full circle to conclusions which confound our ways of logical thinking.

Quantum physics is based on experimental evidence, much of which was obtained in the first half of the 20th century. The odd behavior has been seen in laboratories around the world, continually agreeing with the theory, despite all common sense. Quantum for Dummies

For instance they have found that a single particle can be in two places in the universe at once, and if you are measuring the speed of a particle (velocity) you cannot at the same time know where it is, and vice versa. (Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle)

These findings confound the mindset of the logical-rational. I just doesn't make logical sense.

(NB BUT we would have never got to the moon if we had not been able to know both the speed and the position of the moon and of our spacecraft – this is not science on the very small scale! So please be aware I am not discounting our way of knowing)

So these Quantum Physics findings confound us when we stay in the mindset of the logical-rational.

(-ie If A and B, then C. ) Quantum physics just doesn't make sense to most of us, even traditionally trained scientists, because Quantum physics (New Science) is not linear whereas Newtonian physics is. Newtonian Physics enables us to search for 'cause and effect' (not that we can always find it) but it gives us great satisfaction when we do. So on what is Quantum Physics based. It is based on a non-linear way of knowing. In Western society we have not been trained to know things from this fundamentally different way of understanding ourselves, life and the universe.

(Quantum physics deals with the micro and Newtonian Physics in the macro arena. Newtonian science which is linear is now seen to be a sub-set of Quantum Physics, Newtonian physics does not apply at the fundamental levels of the micro. The macro emerges out of the micro.)

Nevertheless we human beings have the capacities of linear and non-linear in ourselves, in our own physiology.

Let me illustrate linear and non-linear. When you hear something it comes to you in a stream, one word after the other. This is linear. However when you see something you are taking in a whole lot of information simultaneously. This is non-linear. We have both ways of processing information in our physiology. In our Western thinking processes however, one is highly trained and the other is dormant.

Understanding this may help us to see why we are confounded by New Science and non-linear information. I believe that attuning ourselves to non-linear way of knowing will open up to us an understanding of where Indigenous people are coming from, because in my observation and reading I see them as have a strong capacity to know things non-linearly.

Only last Wednesday some of us were with Ray, our indigenous guide at Barmah Forest. I (even with my poor memory) remember two things that indicated he thought non-linearly. It is built in by the way they observe the world around them. He was talking about putting things to Govt that the local people wanted to be done. He said they put in 5 aspects to be done for the project and counted them off on his fingers. The Govt agreed to 2 and rejected the other 3. They rejected the project because they knew it wouldn't work. All those five things had to interact non-linearly

to gain the outcome required.

Another thing he said of the Brumbys. "I mentioned that the Brumbys would be here when we came," And they were. He said that the Govt should have a yearly cull of the Brumbys and the officers said they were too hard to find. He told them he knew they would be in large numbers at a certain place at such and such a time, and they were. His knowledge was just dismissed, probably as a fluke. When we find something to be illogical we need to forgo the sudden conclusion that it can't be right, stop being judgmental and ask "Can I explore this and find my way into another way of knowing?"

Thinking non-linearly means you have developed great skills in thinking in patterns. When we see the Brumbies in the bush in front of us, we are actually using our non-linear capacity and we are seeing a pattern. Can we use our interaction with the Aboriginal person to find out a little of the way they also apprehend the brumbies patterns of living and movement over space and time. Can we begin to gradually move towards knowing about the environment, the movement in it, ours and others behaviour in it. Can we try to see the patterns within which we live? This way of knowing is seeing and knowing through relationships of things and people to each other and the importance of relationships is then known to be fundamental in our lives.

This, I believe, is a heightened skill that Indigenous people have and was part of our more earthy thinking before the elevation of logical thinking (and all its benefits) to a position of being understood by us as the only way of knowing.

This is the strongest myth of Western Society which is held so strongly it prevents us from knowing from of our non-linear experience. Things that don't seem logical to us are dismissed as nonsense, magical thinking, or snake oil. Here comes the rub. We have to seek the sources of non-linear thinking and grow in an understanding of it to know how to separate it from snake oil.

(I need to make an aside here about the nature of patterns. Say we look at the ubiquitous bar-code.

It is a pattern, but it is a linearly developed pattern. Think then of a dot painting and the pattern or patterns within it. It is non-linear. )

(I also need to make a comment about computers. They are constructed to operate with 0 and 1.

They are linearly and thoroughly logically based. But people are developing programs to read speech and other such non-uniform things and as I understand it they are using non-linear thinking to construct the programs.)

So the reason why I have introduced New Science thinking into this talk, is because that is the way our Western society is coming back to humanity's other major way of knowing, through the process of non-linear thinking. We in the West are being confronted by the huge gap we have in our knowledge by not having learned to observe the complex patterns amongst which we live, the knowledge of which does not come through dissecting the material world into its components to see how they work, good and extremely useful though that process is. Through Science itself being confronted by the non-linear substrata of our existence by the infinitesimally small observed in Quantum Physics we have been led back to reading the patterns in the universe and life as another immensely important way of knowing.

We have to let go of our mythology that logical linear thinking is the only real way of knowing.

Let us go back to how we hear and see.

Think about your visual capacity as compared with your auditory capacity. When you look at something you are taking in information from a whole lot of points, simultaneously. This is a non-linear process. It is not one thing after another, it is a whole lot of things at once. (Not that you take in every point that is before you, there is a selectivity – only those points which are relevant to you are taken in and passed from your retina to your visual centre and processed there. It depends on how you are relating to the things in your visual field how much you take in. (For instance, I look at an X-ray of my lungs and have no capacity to interpret it whilst the Dr. says to me see this gap here or this blur there or this dark patch here. He/she says “This is where you have your problem”))

The point is that when you are hearing things they come at you one after the other and you may or may not understand, but you can discuss what words you heard in a specific way, asking what they meant in that context and what you thought they meant.

When you see something it is much harder to describe what you saw and define it. but what you see is a non-linear agglomeration of things you happen to relate to. Their scope is not readily defined. (*Draw dots of what A sees in red, what B sees in blue and C sees in green, on white board, but all overlap each other*)

So we are talking about linear and non-linear forms of perception, both of which are part of our experience. The key characteristic of the linear is the ability to be specific. The key characteristic of the non-linear is the patterns we observe, the relationships in those patterns and the relationship they have to us (eg the patterns of the relationships we have with other people) The same applies in our thinking.

In fact the framework of our thinking (or our world view) colours the way we hear and see, What questions come into our mind, what we discard without further thought are shaped by the way we think. We are selective in what we take notice of. Even in science we select what we think is relevant to test a hypothesis. (This is why Popper said we cannot prove anything by science only disprove things, -we don't necessarily collect all the relevant facts. So in future it can often be shown that a certain experiment was inadequate to give us guidelines or the answers we needed)

If we were more experienced in non-linear thinking we would often select different data because we would have a broader brush view of what we are dealing with.

Remembering now that observing material culture of indigenous people is not the fundamental way to understand where they are coming from but to try and get in touch with what their thinking is, we will look at a couple of examples we know about. (First of all I need to be sure you understand what is meant by material culture – Aboriginal thinkers have told us it is their housing, their artifacts, their food, their dancing, their music making etc. It is their Dreamtime (philosophy is the nearest way we can categorise it) that is not material, but where they find meaning.

Remember the Video we saw of an enactment of an aboriginal community's trial of the pub owner who threw out one of their aboriginal men who came into town on business and went into the pub for a drink. I think, from memory, he was punched down to the ground outside in the street. Anyway we saw how the aboriginal people needed to deal with him out in the bush and, wailing as they did it, they asked him why he did it and accused him of complete wrongdoing. They told him he was banished.

They had to express their relationship to the event and the persons concerned to find their way through their loss and grief. We don't know what Dreamtime knowing they were drawing on but we can see how important it was to them that they related to the event and loss in a very involved way.

Can anyone contribute how you related to that video?

Now here is another example from “Wisdom of the Elders” by Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki  
Pp 132- 135

“There is breathtaking beauty in the Northern Aranda notion of Red Kangaroo Dreaming – of a shared totemic ancestor whose Dreaming tracks across the earth artfully intersect with, illuminate, and animate the lives of human beings, red kangaroos, and countless other life forms and processes. ....

In Dec, 1980, A. E. Newsome, a wildlife biologist and a respected authority on the natural history and ecology of the red kangaroo, published a brief but

remarkable article that calmly suggests that Aranda Red Kangaroo stories might harbour considerably more scientific meaning than skeptics had imagined. In his cautiously worded paper “The Eco-Mythology of the Red Kangaroo in Central Australia,” published in the journal *Mankind*, Newsome reported on an intriguing *congruence of myth and reality*. In fact, Northern Aranda stories about Red Kangaroo Dreaming and the sacred spring at Krantji, he wrote, *may have an underlying ecological rationale*.

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Aboriginal tales of the Dreamtime travels of Krantjirinja and other kangaroo ancestors during the Creation Time, Newsome found, revealed a sophisticated grasp of red kangaroo ecology. A map of the ancestors' overland trek near Krantji – breathing life and form into the landscape as they went – corresponded with uncanny precision to maps of the preferred habitats of red kangaroo, which Newsome had painstakingly assembled by scientific study. Conversely, a map of the subterranean portions of the ancestors' Dreamtime journeys, during which their radiant powers diminished, corresponded neatly with expanses of desert lands largely inhospitable to red kangaroo populations.

This gives a picture of their ability to discern patterns, and relationships within patterns, that allows them to make in a holistic way rather than by dissection, a scientific analysis of the world around them so that they live within it without destroying the source of their well-being. They know the world through patterns and relationships. That reminds me of what Ray said last week about where the Brumbies would be. He knew their habits and patterns of life, where the Western Rangers had no idea.

We of the West can move beyond our “Either/Or” assessment of how to live life, either “our way” or “their way”, which from time immemorial has degenerated into “My Way or the Highway”, destructive for both them and us.

Or we can recognise in ourselves also the “Both/And”, Both linear and non-linear and strive to integrate the two in our thinking. Both/And, means “Both” -deeper and deeper dissection of the material world and logical analysis along with fuller and fuller appreciation of pattern and relationships; the “And” means the fruitfulness of integrating the both.

Here, for considering against the content of this talk, at home or later in this group, if you wish, a summary by Deborah Bird Rose from her book “Dingo Makes Us Human” quoted in Knudtson & Suzuki p 40

It is a summary of her understanding of “The Dreaming's inherent ethos regarding the proper relationship between human beings and other species ... (as) four basic

laws:.....

- Balance: A system cannot be life enhancing if it is out of kilter, and each part shares in the responsibility of sustaining itself and balancing others.
- Response: Communication is reciprocal. There is here a moral obligation to learn to understand, to pay attention, and to respond
- Symmetry: In opposing and balancing each other, parts must be equivalent because the purpose is not to “win” or to dominate, but to block, thereby producing further balance.
- Autonomy: No species, no group, or country is “boss” for another; each adheres to it's own Law. Authority and dependence are necessary within parts, but not between parts.”

References:

The Chalice and The Blade, Riane Eisler Pandora, an imprint of Harper Collins 1990  
A study of Western thought-form and behaviour based on her anthropological studies.

Wisdom of the Elders, Peter Knudtson & David Suzuki, 1992, Allen & Unwin  
Edition 1994.

Quantum for Dummies

Further reading:

Reports from a Wild Country—ethics for decolonisation, Deborah Bird Rose,  
University of New South Wales Press, 2004 and other books by her.