

Tribal Epistemology

Observations On ‘Self’ and ‘Knowing’

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Cowlitz is a consciousness of people, place and cosmos that holds within it the notion of eternal changability. Cowlitz is a mixture of many parts (resulting from generations of contact with neighbors and visitors from great distances). It is a single consciousness (born from countless generations of interaction between individuals, their extended families—including other animals, other plants, waters, stones, mountains, the Moon, the Sun and stars and prairies—and revered ancestors. Shaped like the head of a deer (mowich), Cowlitz territory extends from the mouth of the river in the south where live the Sputlamilx and runs north and then east up the river to the mountains where live the Taidnapum—all Cowlitz. A smoke-house people, the Taidnapum of the northern upper head of mowich and the Sputlamilx of the southern mouth of mowich are bound by the river. The left cheek of *mowich* is Mount St. Helen and the right cheek is made from the Black Hills. The southern base of Tahoma, or what is now called Mt. Rainier, forms the crown of mowich and Cowlitz Prairie forms the flat space on the snout. We Cowlitz remain in the place that was first peopled by our ancestors.

The great river flowing from the mountains defines, nourishes and sustains the people, informs them and holds promise or disaster for their future. Living is made up of good and not so good choices taken by the people. While virtually all things change and re-cycle, certainty in the people's mind comes from experiencing daily differences and repeated reminders of what has already occurred.

Individual personality is only distinguishable from the collective self by virtue of its physical separateness—and that is only illusion itself. The personal self is to the

collective self as the upstream waters are to the full rivers below. No part of the river is truly indistinguishable from any other part. One cup of river water is the same as the water passing by. The singular distinction of the cup of river water is the "cup." The water takes the form of the cup, an elastic attribute that permits adjustment to change. The Cowlitz who lives rightly knows that the superficial differences between the people only give meaning to relational concepts. No significant meaning can be attached to a fractional quantity of water except that it is a part of the whole. It is the totality of water that has meaning.

I use the river's water as a metaphor for the collective self and the fractional quantity of water as a representation for the "personal self." It is the relationship, the interdependence, and simultaneous capacity for independence of the self that must be emphasized. These seemingly contradictory capacities are at the root of knowing. Without this simultaneity life could not exist. It is, therefore, a matter of the greatest respect that one recognizes, is aware of, the relationship between "self" and "knowing."

This observation has greatest significance for comprehending "knowing" as a consequence of relationships discerned by the self.

Fluid Simultaneity and the Sense of Singleness

When a person stands in the middle of a prairie there sometimes develops a sense of being alone, vulnerable and disconnected. Yet when one is surrounded by trees and other people ¹ like *mowich*, the bear and flying things there is a sense of being a part of or joined with all other things. This can be quite the opposite experience if one is born in a place that is open like the rolling lands of western Yupic territory [Alaska]. There one can be alone and vulnerable in the forest. The point remains the same. Yet it is equally possible to be in the open prairie and "lose oneself" in the immensity of things. What

¹ All beings are thought of as people in different forms in the way of thinking among nations in the Pacific Northwest. Each "people" has a name and an age, and virtually all "people" are older and more experienced than human beings.

accounts for the singular sense and the sense of unified submersion? It can be an illusion or other trick of the mind or it can be the spirit seeing the instance of singleness when there is a separation.

Humans are not the only people who sense this singleness and contrast it with the unified submersion. *Mowich*² travels always collectively, even when they can't see each other. They can look like trees and bushes. They can even pretend to be a stone. In these ways *mowich* is at once itself and also all other things. Still, owing to a trick *mowich* can be single, a distinct self—vulnerable, at risk. At a time like this *mowich* can give itself to a good hunter whose hunger is surpassed only by a wish to ask *mowich* for its life.

Mowich chooses a time when it will give up its life ... exposing its single self. When it remains a part of the whole, *mowich* is not exposed. No harm can come. Like other people, *mowich* exists simultaneously within the “collective self” even as it exposes the single self. When choosing to express the personal self *mowich* is exposed and can offer itself.

The natural condition of things is for people to experience simultaneity; and it is a trick or exercise of will to chose singleness. As a part of the collective self, one is not aware of singleness or its possibility. There is only an awareness of the tensions and inclinations that give rise to change. This awareness is shared among all people. It is a common knowing—a common consciousness. *Mowich* experiences a calm serenity and demonstrates this when it's tail is not nervous. It's ears do not turn every which way and it feeds quietly on grass or blackberry leaves.

These qualities can be observed in the salmon too. Throughout its life salmon exhibits a thorough serenity as it travels from its birth place, down the river, finally to the ocean. For most of its life, salmon lives in the ocean—a part of the fluid great self—satisfied. Not until it returns to its mother river to gather in cool dimples in the river bottom and then to rush up stream to its birth place does salmon finally expose its singleness. Each individual salmon must challenge the swift stream by jumping and

² This is the word for “deer people” used here respectfully recognizing the proper name.

swimming against the down flowing water. Only those with the courage, strength and great power of *tamonowith* will meet the great challenge. Reaching the place of their birth, each salmon then spawns new life—giving up its body and rejoining its spirit with the great consciousness.

Singleness of consciousness is always temporary and fleeting while the collective consciousness is the permanent and perpetual condition of things. All the beings, all the people experience these things just the same.

Braided Rivers to Knowing

Time, space and place animate the great consciousness which fills the universe. At different periods in the brief history of human beings at least five different, but related, modes of thought lead to knowing, the ultimate expression of consciousness—apprehending the living universe. To comprehend the great consciousness one might reflect on these modes of thinking that characterize different kinds of human efforts at knowing. While contemporary thinkers consider most of these different modes of thought as expressions of “more primitive ways of thinking” I suggest that they are all coincident with each other. They are merely streams originating at different places leading to a common river—fed by the same rain. They are different strands eventually braided as a single cord—some strands in the braid more significant at times, then less significant at other times.

Consider, if you will, the different streams of thought that flow, not necessarily comfortably, into a single river of thought that offers ways of knowing. These are *Cyclicism* (typically a synthesis of Persian, Greek, Nubian and other influences rooted in eastern Mediterranean and Africa), *Cuarto Spiralism* (rooted in the Americas), *Fatalism* (rooted in Asia), *Providentialism* (transformed from the eastern Mediterranean and Africa into Europe), and *Progressivism* (formed in Europe as a synthesis of influences resulting from modern interaction between Europe, the Americas and the Pacific Islands). A brief discussion of each stream reflects the diversity of human cultures over time, and their similarities too, thus presenting a range of ways of knowing.

Cyclicism

The Greek/Persian/Nubian reality of three thousand years ago comprehended a past and a present formed in a great circle. At any time before the present there is a point of the circle that is the past ... usually the remembered past. As time proceeds around the circle one encounters the past and repeats the transactions and events as the present. This mode of thought provided a closed, reassuring and satisfying existence. One could predict the future merely by remembering the past. This cyclical reality proved quite adequate for the social, economic and political life that grew and flourished across the Mediterranean throughout Africa.

Aristotle reflected the *cyclical reality* in his thinking when he engaged in observations that served as the basis for his scientific, ethical and political commentaries. It was with the certainty of a well practiced marksman that Aristotle asserted in his *Politics* that some people are “born slaves” while others are born to rule and direct slaves. Those who were born slaves, Aristotle reasoned, shall always be slaves and shall produce new slaves because they had always been slaves before. While Aristotle’s claim was propounded as an absolute certainty and his assertion remained a key element in Christian liturgy throughout the ages, his claim is clearly wrong—even though many people still believe what is a patently absurd idea. Still, Aristotle’s idea of “born slave” is a wonderful example of cyclical reality even though it is absurd.

Limiting as cyclical thinking is it remains a potent part of the human intellectual tool-set for comprehending and engaging consciousness. Though not a dominant influence in contemporary thought, cyclicism remains a fundamental stream feeding the contemporary river of thought.

So powerful was cyclical thinking, and so weak were those competing ways of thinking three thousand years ago, it continued to dominate and shape the thinking of all peoples within the reach of eastern Mediterranean influence through to the 18th century of the common era.

The Roman Catholic church began to build its fortunes in the 5th century of the common era on the intellectual foundations of the Greeks (used here in large part due to

the historical bias of the Church, but most assuredly recognizing the profound and dominant influences of the Persians and Nubians) and their successors, the Romans. As the emerging successor to the collapsed Roman Empire and the primary political body with administrative capabilities throughout all of Europe, eastern Mediterranean and northern Africa the Roman Catholic Church proceeded to define a conceptual era that still echoes in *Providentialism*.

Cuarto Spiralism

Students of Mayan literature commonly depict the calendar of these ancient people, the 5,125 year “Great Cycle” as evidence of a mode of thought fundamental to the original middle American and south American cultures. Associating the Mayan mode of thought with cycles where time and space repeat in infinite circles, like the Mayan and the Aztec calendars appear to suggest, is so common among scholars that few have stopped to consider how they may be actually projecting their own cultural templates on to the evidence of Mayan and western hemispheric ways of thinking. Though satisfying to their templates, imposing cyclicism in the context of the western hemisphere tends to conceal the reality of a mode of thought unique in the world.

In an attempt to reveal the underlying character of this distinct mode of thinking, I



shift the symbolism slightly from a circle to a spiral. With this change I believe it is easier to apprehend a mode of thought I have labeled “Cuarto Spiralism” or more simply, “Spiralism.” More than any iconographic image the *Hunab Ku*, translated as “One Gives of Movement and Measure,” (Argüelles 1987 Page 52) affirms *Cuarto Spiralism*. This mode of thought takes its name from the infinite repetition of four spiraling arcs, four “cycles” in the Mayan conception of time.

The *Hunab Ku* symbolizes the ideas: Movement corresponds to energy, the principle of life and all pervading consciousness immanent in all phenomena.” (Argüelles 1987 Page 52)) Though similar to the Yin and Yang of the Tao, Hunab Ku is much more. As

the symbol of *Spiralism* the Hunab Ku illustrates the interconnectiveness of all life, the four cardinal directions, the four arcs of time and perpetual movement in all directions through space. The past, the present and the future are all represented in the *spiralist* mode of thought. A spiral in space moves outward, inward, forward and backward occupying space and not occupying space all at the same time. Life and death are, therefore two aspects of the same thing. Wholeness and particularity are manifestations of one and the same quality of existence. These are the central attributes of *Cuarto Spiralism*.

Cuarto Spiralism predominates as the underlying mode of thought of the many cultures in the western hemisphere recorded in their literature, stories, songs, dances and symbols. Peoples as remote from one another as those living in the Arctic North and those in Patagonia and the Micmac, Cowlitz, Hopi and Kiowa as well as the Mapuché, Yanomami, Aymara, Sumo, Pipil and Zapotec share a common, underlying mode of thought which infuses a wide diversity of cultures.

Cuarto Spiralism permits the apprehension of the universe as a whole while giving respect to particularities. The mutuality of respect is the essential glue that connects and separately identifies all parts of the whole, living universe. It is necessarily the case that all aspects of the universe are alive and possessing of the capacity to choose. It is this capacity of the living universe to choose that leaves the future unpredictable and open to surprise.

Describing this concept from the Lakota perspective, Vine Deloria, Jr. writes:

The willingness of entities to allow others to fulfill themselves, and the refusal of any entity to intrude thoughtlessly on another, must be the operative principle of the Universe. (Deloria Jr. 1996 Winter Page 41)

The discipline demanded of each entity to fulfill the obligations of mutual respect establishes yet another level of unpredictability for the future. Failure to achieve perfect discipline would most surely introduce variability and thus alter the quality of choice and the mutuality of respect. It is just this condition of the living universe that drives each

entity to learn, to acquire knowledge or as Pamela Colorado says, "...to find...[a] knowledge system in the west that would be capable of 'carrying the weight of God'." (Colorado 1996 Winter Page 6)

Cuarto Spiralism shapes systems of tribal thought throughout the western hemisphere as a structure that permits aspects of experience that come before to combine with aspects of the present to provide the basis for interpreting the future. Modern Mayan Day Keepers demonstrated their reliance on this structure, on the mode of thought, when they stepped from a cave (January 1, 1994) in the highlands of Chiapas to announce the coming of the end of the fourth cycle and the impending arrival of the "Sixth Sun." By their interpretation of the sacred texts, the Day Keepers set in motion a series of events that began to transform the Mexican and Guatemalan states and the peoples of the western hemisphere—and beyond. Such a simple act and the events that followed demonstrates the powerful influence of the *spiralist* mode of thought.

Fatalism

The overwhelming power of nature and its determinate control over all matters of existence is the view central to *fatalism*, a mode of thought predominant among peoples throughout Asia—particularly those who embrace the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Human beings can aspire to and achieve the attribute of "superior man" and perform acts of piety which conform to the "will of heaven." Acting "rightly" is the goal of *fatalism*, but it is recognition of the "order of things" that ensures achievement of the "superior man." Confucius (551-479 BCE) is commonly understood to be the primary and most influential exponent of philosophies which form the underlying structure of *fatalism*. "Li," the term used by Confucius when discussing human conduct in relation to nature suggests the requirement that humans observe true piety and thus make it possible to interpret the "will of heaven" as acts on earth. By virtue of the preeminent order in heaven, a *fatalist* is obliged to "act rightly" to conform to this order, or to discover the path on which to travel to achieve "superior man."

Confucius always encouraged caution and deliberate care in the pursuit of "superior man." Where a person is surrounded by disorder, Confucius urges one to be still to take

guidance from the orderly nature of things. In his words, quoted by Wilhelm, we can readily see that it is the person who must recognize limitations and await order:

Where disorder develops, words are the first steps. If the prince is not discreet, he loses his servant. If the servant is not discreet, he loses his life. If germinating things are not handled with discretion, the perfecting of them is impeded. Therefore the superior man is careful to maintain silence and does not go forth. (Anonymous 1977 Page 232)

Fatalism gives human beings an active role in choosing a course of action, but the greater powers of the “will of heaven” ultimately hold sway.

Providentialism

Augustine, the powerful and influential fifth century North African Bishop of Hippo, modified the emphasis of classical Greece cyclical thinking to support the liturgical, economic and political needs of the Church even as he affirmed “original sin” and described the place of virtue in the afterlife. Bishop Augustine (A.D. 354-430), bridged what some called the classical era with the beginning of the Christian era and was the father of Christian philosophy and theology. He was also the originator of the idea of Divine Providence.

Through Incarnation, God has given assurance that an elect group will receive salvation. Augustine insists that God is just in condemning the majority for Adam's sin. However, a few men such as Saul (who become Paul) will be saved "on the road to Damascus." A small minority will be chosen along with the good angels for eternal salvation. They will constitute the City of God, and will live forever in heaven in perfect peace and happiness.(Bury 1932, 1955 page 46)

As he incorporated Aristotle’s cyclical reasoning into his own, Augustine proceeded to affirm that salvation would only come at the end of time which he conceived as being virtually the end of his own life—the essence of *Providentialism*. Creating dichotomy as the basis for his analysis,³ Augustine advanced the,

³ The dichotomy often advanced pits feminine “paganism” against “masculine” Christianity resulting in an assertion of masculine dominance.

concepts of self-love and love of God, first, to criticize the pagan political order and especially the Roman Empire and, second, to sketch in the broad outlines of a Christian political order. The two cities are commingled on earth, and mankind will not actually be separated into the elect and the unredeemed until the end of time.(Bury 1932, 1955 page 47)

By the 12th century of the present era, *Providentialism* claimed center stage of the Christian world which, by then, had a wide reach over the world. And by the 16th century *Providentialism*, it could be said, claimed predominance. Louis Le Roy, a French translator of Greek classical works, began the process of de-emphasizing *cyclicism* as he claimed the preeminence of Divine Providence:

"If the memory of the past is the instruction of the present and the premonition of the future, it is to be feared that having reached so great excellence, power, wisdom, studies, books, industries will decline, as has happened in the past, and disappear--confusion succeeding to the order and perfection of to-day, rudeness to civilisation, ignorance to knowledge. I already foresee in imagination nations, strange in form, complexion, and costume, overwhelming Europe—like the Goths, Huns, Vandals, Lombards, Saracens of old--destroying our cities and palaces, burning our libraries, devastating all that is beautiful. I foresee in all countries wars, domestic and foreign, factions and heresies which will profane all things human and divine; famines, plagues, and floods; the universe approaching an end, world-wide confusion, and the return of things to their original chaos." (Bury 1932, 1955 at page 46-47 Quoting Le Roy from L'Introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes, ou traité préparatif à l'Apologie pour Hérodote, ed. Ristelhuber, 2 vols., 1879. Originally published in 1566.)

Foreseeing the conceptual trap he created, Le Roy quickly affirmed Divine Providence:

“However much these things proceed according to the fatal law of the world, and have their natural causes, yet events depend principally on divine Providence which is superior to nature and alone knows the predetermined times of events.” (Bury 1932, 1955 at page 47 Quoting Le Roy from L'Introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes, ou traité préparatif à l'Apologie pour Hérodote, ed. Ristelhuber, 2 vols., 1879. Originally published in 1566.)

While *Providentialism* accepted repeating history as a mark of truth, and, indeed claimed for all of Christendom deep roots in “classical Greek culture,” a slightly different wrinkle was introduced: The purpose of all this human activity—“grace” and eternal

goodness in heaven. The wealth, the chosen few, were guaranteed a good place in heaven if they led a “ good life.” The poor and the enslaved were guaranteed only that they would always be poor and enslaved (thanks to Aristotle), but the privileged need only think good thoughts and occasionally extend a helping hand to those unfortunates to get a seat next to Saint Peter. Like *cyclicism* before it (and along side it, to be more precise), *Providentialism* has continued to wield a strong influence in the daily lives of people all over the world despite the absurdity of its major thesis. While *Providentialism* reached its peak in the late 19th century, a competing way of knowing was already in full bloom: *progressivism*.

Progressivism:

The predominant mode of thought in the modern era is *progressivism*. Though it cannot be said that *progressivism* began on a definite date, scholars agree that French Historian Jean Bodin's (1566) rejection of 16th century theory of the degeneration of man and the popular notion of classical Greek virtue and felicity marked a major departure from the views of his contemporaries. (Bury 1932, 1955 Page 36) Commenting on Bodin’s departure and laying out the principle tenets of *progressivism*, Bury notes:

For history largely depends on the will of men, which is always changing; every day new laws, new customs, new institutions, both secular and religious, come into being, and new errors. (citation METHODUS, cap. VII. p.353) But in this changing scene we can observe a certain regularity, a law of oscillation. Rise is followed by fall, and fall by rise; it is a mistake to think that the human race is always deteriorating. If that were so, we should long ago have reached the lowest stage of vice and iniquity. On the contrary, there has been, through the series of oscillations, a gradual ascent. In the ages which have been foolishly designated as gold and silver men lived like the wild beasts; and from that state they have slowly reached the humanity of manners and the social order which prevail today. (Bury 1932, 1955 Page 38)

Avoiding *fatalism* and pushing aside *Providentialism* Bodin attempts to bring human history into close synchrony with the divine universe while affirming the power of man’s will over events. (Bury 1932, 1955 Page 43) This conceptual view placed the human being in the dominant role as controller of destiny on earth. As progressive thinking matured with popular adoption of its basic premises it became the foundation of what is

widely understood to be “western thinking,” due to its association with western Europe—the successor to the “western Holy Roman Empire.” Bodin provided the stimulus for Descartes to formulate his nascent progressivism which in turn provided the foundation for Pascal’s thinking and the development of the French Jansenist movement (similar to the Puritan movement in England) in the 17th Century of the common era. (Bury 1932, 1955 Page 69) The Cartesian formulation of the supremacy of reason and the invariability of natural law struck directly at the foundations of *Providentialism* and established the “supremacy of man” as a major pillar supporting the progressive mode of thought.

With human beings in the seat of power, profound changes in the natural environment, in relations between human beings, conceptions of history, intellectual development and religious concepts became possible. Bury attributes to Turgot the rather modern understanding of “universal history as the progress of the human race advancing as an immense whole steadily, though slowly, through alternative periods of calm and disturbance towards greater perfection.” (Bury 1932, 1955 Page 155) *Progressivism* launched potent human movements from the 18th Century to the present that spread from western Europe to touch nearly every corner of the earth, virtually every society. The “inevitability” of progress became for many peoples in the industrial world a proven reality as guns, commerce, politics and disease overwhelmed peoples throughout the world and the preeminence of other modes of thought influential among those peoples.

Weaving the Braided River:

In the short span of six thousand years, human beings conceived of numerous modes of thought—reflecting the relationship between people, their natural environment and their interpretation of the cosmos. I have mentioned just five of these different modes and noted that each was comprehended as an infallible way of demonstrating consciousness. No doubt each mode of thought contains infallible truth of ultimate consciousness, but it is apparent from even the brief survey given above that there are aspects of absurdity as well.

Among the modes of thought suggested above, it might be noted that a major difference has to do with the place human beings occupy in the scheme of things. Where humans are perceived to be the dominant and therefore primary determinant of reality, consciousness is presented as a one dimensional concept—wholly dependent on human beings. Consciousness is apparently conceived as a much more multi-dimensional concept where humans are perceived as a part of a greater reality. When one takes all five modes of thought and weaves them together as a single braid the potential for a more thorough comprehension of consciousness in the universe becomes possible.

Tribal diversity reflects the evolved relationship between people, their geography and natural environment and their interpretations of the cosmos. Taken separately, interpretations seem at odds, and may, indeed, conflict. But when one sets aside the apparent conflicts it appears that humans and other peoples (including plants, minerals, fire, water, winds, and other animals) share a common consciousness within the living universe. Where there are differences in modes of tribal thought one only need recognize “local influences,” or cultural particularities as the explanation. Such cultural particularities are important and cannot be dismissed, but they must be understood to have their unique importance in the specific context in which they appear. Differing cultural contexts help to ensure opportunities for diverse discovery, a constant source of renewal and replenishment. Yet, it is apparent, all modes of thought recognize the common consciousness in the universe.

Relativity of Self and Knowing

For all peoples, no less for Cowlitz, particular cultural context inspires a sense of existing at the vortex of all consciousness. This is mainly due to the rather limited capacity of humans to comprehend the fullness of the living universe. It is due to the relatively recent arrival of humans on the earthly plane that humans have this limited capacity, and must, as a consequence learn from other peoples. The eagle has the ability to travel over vast distances and see events from the sky; and so it is that the eagle can teach humans. The mountain is old and has seen many things over vast amounts of time,

and so it is that the mountains can teach humans. The sun, the moon and the stars play a part in the creation of all things, and so it is that the sun, the moon and the stars can teach humans.

Through the cultural practices of each distinct people individual human beings come to know their personal identities and learn to know truth through distinct modes of thought. The diversity of human experience serves as a vast library for ways of comprehending and thus serves human beings in their effort to survive. The diversity of human cultures reflects the diversity of other peoples and shows how humans have learned. It is this immense diversity that creates the relativity of self and knowing and the appearance of particularity. All of the cultural relativity merely demonstrates the wholeness of consciousness, of self and knowing, when taken together—just as a unified mode of thought is conceivable when many modes of thought are braided.

Living as a part of the Universe:

In such a short time given to live each human being seeks to find a proper place in relation to all things. Achieving such a place ensures balance, alignment and happiness. When one balances relations with the river, the mountains, the flying people and four legged people, and with the cosmos one becomes properly aligned in relation to the living universe. Such alignment produces balance when one gives respect to the nature and character of all things encountered. When one fails to comprehend the nature and character of things, it is necessary to take a moment to learn from other people. Like all people, humans have the capacity to learn, but humans have a greater need to learn owing to their relative youth, inexperience and lack of knowledge. It is owing to this serious limitation that humans have needed a brain that allows them to learn more things.

Other peoples, like the fish, the eagle and the mountain, have great knowledge that permit them to comprehend the nature of other peoples. They achieve balance in relation to other peoples because of this greater knowledge. Human beings are the “little brothers and sisters,” and so they must take special measures to learn to live in proper respect and relation to all things. The ultimate goal, as a consequence, appears to be that humans will

live as a part of the universe as do all living things. Humans will come to comprehend their part in the consciousness of the living universe and its eternal changability.

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