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A Civilized Account of Savage Thought

How do "Natives" Think?

House of Learning

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A CIVILIZED ACCOUNT
OF SAVAGE THOUGHT:
HOW DO "NATIVES" THINK?

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2:00 PM LIBRARY AUDITORIUM
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION TO FOLLOW

"Prepare every needful thing... even... a house of learning." Doctrine and Covenants 88:119

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Thank you. I think as all titles of talks these days are teasers, so is this one. But the topic is of great interest to me. It is what I have studied through library research as well as my own field research and I intend to give you my own idiosyncratic account of it. I feel I'm old enough to be able to do that. I can only cover this topic briefly and I wish to do so by dividing it into three sections. I would like to firstly look at the anthropological history of savage thought. Then I would like to look at the basic structure of human thought or human imaginary world, and as human imaginary worlds contain the ideas about the nature of reality that we accept as true. Thirdly, I want to pursue the question, how do human beings come to know they think are true about the world to actually be true.

If this seems like a dry topic, I apologize, and invite you quietly nap in these very comfortable seats. Modern anthropology was born in the mid 19th century, during the golden age of European colonialism. I think that it is true that for the most part the first Europeans to have sustained, meaningful contact with natives were the missionaries. And during the 19th century there was an unprecedented number of mission societies establish in Europe and even in United States. Missionaries had a very difficult time, settling down in some society, they did not know the language, or anything about the people, and they were there to save souls and also to figure out how to translate Christianity into context so it could be understood, and quite often to translate the scriptures into native languages.

One of the things that missionaries were able to do, was to discover that there are people in this world whose ideas about the nature of reality were very very different from their own. Initially, I think that many of them felt the ideas were incomprehensibly different. But over time, quite a number of missionaries actually prospered with languages and for the most part the languages of Africa were first recorded and for the first grammars and dictionaries put together by missionaries. It is also true that many mission societies establish journals in which missionaries could record their experiences. Some of them were anecdotal, others were a bit more serious, but many of these things intrigued and delighted the readers of these journals. Now, intellectually and academically the second half of the 19th century was dominated by various theories of evolution which in time found their way into anthropology. The particular kind of evolution that found its way into social anthropology was a teleological version of it that human beings were evolving toward something specific, and that happened to be Victorian Englishman. Victorian England represented the absolute zenith of the history of mankind and the achievements of mankind, and so scales were put together of the various stages of advancing toward, um Victorian England. I suppose the first ugs and grunts, eventually found their way into savagery, and eventually moved into barbarism, and then found civilization and these various words were also connected to technological developments.

The real question was, is the movement toward Victorian Englishman uni-linear, or multi-linear. Well initially most of the 19th century anthropologists felt that it was uni-linear, so that if we went back to the crudest, rudest societies possible, typically thought of the Australian black fellows, this would be how Englishman really lived, worked, and thought thousands, and thousands, and thousands of years ago. The reports of primitives

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that came back in travel literature as well as mission society journals often portrayed the worlds as bazaar. And this provoked questions, how do these savages think? As this question was investigated, it seemed to equate a simple society, meaning a fairly simple political structure with simple minds. So questions of the origin of the idea of God and the soul, these sorts of questions particularly intrigued the Germans, and they indulged in what we would call if I were a horse theorizing. How would any rude, crude savage hit upon the idea that there might be a God. Well, according to some of these German schools of thought, there might be some savage out there who is party to a funders store and here is these enormous claps of thunder and the bolts of lightening and suddenly thinks that there must be something beyond this.

How did a savage hit upon the idea that he might have a soul? Some man goes down to the river to draw the water, he looks into the water and lo and behold there is something staring back at him, his own reflection. He is not bright enough to recognize that its his reflection but he see it is somewhat connected with him as he moves his head and his arms and his hands, and therefore came up with the idea that he has a soul. Or a woman might have a dream one night. In this dream she sees her dead granny who reaches out to her and gives her something lovely to eat, and because of that dream the idea of the soul that has gone onto heaven in born. The idea behind all this was, according to 19th century Victorian era anthropologists, that savages lived in a compressed mentality, which basically meant that they could not distinguish between various kinds of reality. Dream reality, day dreaming reality, and waking reality were all one thing, could not distinguish clearly and easily between them.

In France, Levi Bruel put forward the idea that primitives had a childish mentality. By this he meant that they reasoned in the way that perhaps a seven or an eight might reason. This is a type of reasoning. That it was very different from the educated, Victorian, English way of reasoning about the world. These ideas held sway for a number of decades, but were eventually developed, defrocked, and set aside. I think principally by the work of Sir Edward Everett Evans Pritchard. In his pioneering study, "Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande," he went to one of these primitive societies and studied witchcraft. But instead of witchcraft being a thing of hocus pocus. Evans Pritchard portrayed as a logical system of thought to explain extraordinary misfortune. For the Azande everyone is born with witchcraft. Its actually seated above the large intestine, a little black thing they call mangoo. The point of witchcraft is to kill others, somehow consciously or unconsciously this mangoo substance can leave the body, take flight at night, and attach itself to another human being for a while and begin to gobble away the soul substance. It takes quite a bit of time before the soul substance is gone but as the soul substance goes, a person weakens, sickens and eventually dies. But it is a power that all human beings possess. This means then as Evan Pritchard puts it, that when something extraordinary happens to us we begin to suspect witchcraft. If I am a typical Azande man who has walked through the forest a million times and I have bonked my shin on a tree, I have the expectation that that wound will heal within a week and I'll be fine. But what happens now if it is still bleeding and oozing puss. This is something extraordinary to explain it in light of witchcraft. And by so doing then I know how to deal with the problem and how to get myself well.

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So Evans Pritchard presents the Azande as people who reasoned as logically as any Europeans, it is only that the premises of their system of thinking are very different from our own, and as he would say, they were wrong, Azande were wrong, their premises were incorrect. About three decades later, a man in England named Peter Winch asked a very interesting question in a critique of Evans Pritchard's work, which was how can we really know for certain that witchcraft powers do not exist? His conclusion was that we can't. There is no way empirically to prove that witchcraft exists or does not exist. So, upon which basis do we say it does not exist? Witchcraft simply is. This is a very interesting thing to consider about our human imaginary worlds. Most of the ideas, and they are not capable of being true or false. Let us think for a moment of priesthood power. Suppose that someone is ill, and has a blessing, and feels that priesthood power was involved in healing. Can we prove that priesthood power was not involved? Can we conclusively prove that it was involved? For those who live in that imaginary world, it is real. This is Peter Winches argument, for those who do not live in that world it may not be real but we can not prove that it does not exist.

Strangely enough, these days those whom 19th century gentlemen called savages are actually critiquing our thought, our imaginary worlds, our ways of organizing life, and finding them incomprehensible and inhuman. Books such as "Things fall apart" and the "Ambiguous adventure" are quite brilliant reversals of the Victorian age paradigm. So that's a bit on history.

Now let's move into the question of the structure of the human imaginary world. What is a paradigm, or a world view, or a cultural world, or an imaginary world? These are terms that basically refer to the same sort of thing. Well it takes a while to figure out and to understand what this means, but I will say that the imaginary world is our world, it is a human world, it is the totalizing intellectual world in which we live. It contains all the ideas about the nature of reality that we have come to except as true, all of the ideas we use to interpret what is going on around us, to guide our actions, the ideas we use to reflect on things, to make decisions about what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. The ideas we use to order a household, to determine what is beautiful and what is not and so forth.

These ideas are read into the world. They are not read out of the world. It is a projection that we living in a human imaginary world, place upon the worlds so the world appears to us to be this way. And as I have already mentioned it contains those world, ideas as Winch has said, ideas whose ultimate truth or falsity is empirically indeterminate. Now let's think about this with another example. Perhaps most of us here accept the idea that Joseph Smith had a first vision. Is it possible for us to conclusively prove in an empirical sense that he had a vision? Is it possible for us to prove that he did not have a vision? This is what ideas in our imaginary worlds are like. They simply are, most of them are completely incapable of being proven conclusively true or conclusively false. This will eventually feed into the third element of my talk on how we come to know things to be true.

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Let's move back now to the idea of how these ideas in our imaginary world are organized. We know that there is some minimal standard of coherence among the many ideas that comprise our imaginary world. It could be hundreds of thousands of ideas, but how are they organized? In a moment of Aristotelian rapture Iris Murdock observed that our mind was naturally one making; an idea that somehow our minds what ever our mind actually is, generates the impression that there is a general coherence among the ideas of our imaginary world. Somehow these desperate and sundry ideas are seen as to somehow cohere. If all our thoughts and ideas about the nature of things are somehow organized, what is that structure? It is a very difficult question to answer. What is the mind's template for organizing these ideas?

If we looked at the works of Emile Durkheim, a sociologist, of the late 19th and early 20th century, he has a solution to this. He believes that basically everything in human life has a social origin. Eventually that idea becomes oxymoronic, but this is what he meant. Somehow the structure of the organization of our society, eventually works our way on our minds so that it becomes the organizing template we use for categorizing the rest of the world. So for instance, if we were Australian aborigines and we lived in a society of twelve tribes, somehow that number twelve would be very important. Our minds over time would pick it up. And not only would our society be organized according to twelve tribes, the animal world would be divided into twelve sections, the plant world would be divided into twelve sections. Somehow, instead of four cardinal directions we would invent twelve directions. Our whole world then would be organized in a fashion after the organization of our society. And it is through growing up in such a social structure that our minds were more or less unconsciously absorb that structure, and then we begin to use it, quite unaware of the fact that we have absorbed it and are using it, because it seems as self evident to us.

The Durkheimian idea has had a great impact on anthropology, people still use this idea. I myself find it not very useful, not very true to life, but it is one attempt to understand what the organization of the ideas of our imaginary world might look like. A successor to Durkheim, many decades, well not many, but several decades later Levi Straus had a similar idea but it was actually opposite. Things do not have a social origin. Things have an origin in the mind itself. Levi stressed the idea was that somehow human beings evolved, our minds looked at the world and began to notice connections between things. Connections that might not really exist, but connections that our mind itself began to force upon the world, chief among which is binary opposition; that the world actually partakes of binary opposition. So we have light and dark, male and female, up and down, and so on and so forth. But somehow in our interaction with the world, our mind is stimulated to begin to see a pattern, some kind of organization in the natural world, this impresses itself upon our mind and then becomes the organizing template for our social worlds.

I don't think Levi Straus's ideas have had quite the longevity of Durkheim's, I had a flirtation with it for quite a number of years, and I still enjoy that flirtation from time to time but ultimately I am not convinced by it. It seems to me that these ideas are

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too simplistic, that our minds are far more complex than any Durkheimian paradigm or Levistraussian model could possibly present.

So let's move on and think a bit about this, and now we are getting into the idiosyncrasies. Let's think for a moment about an imaginary world. What is it in human beings that allows us to actually have and live in an imaginary world. So I think that if we can understand something about that, we have a better chance of understanding something about the organization of that world. Well turn to the work of the German philosopher Aaron Casseray. His ideas on this subject are fruitful and useful for us to contemplate. For Casseray one of the principle attributes of the human mind that separates us from all other living creatures is abstraction, the ability to abstract. Now what does this word mean? To abstract obviously means to remove from. When he uses this word, what he means is that human beings have the ability to remove ourselves from our concrete contexts, at least in our minds. I'll give you an example of this, most of you here who are uninterested in this talk, which is probably all of you, your minds are a million miles away. You are thinking about something that you did last summer, anticipating some grundgy meal at 5 o'clock in the cougar eat. But how can you do this if you are stuck in this present concrete context of the here and now. Somehow, our mind is able to do this. It can transport us backwards and forwards in time and space. This according to Casseray is an attribute that only human beings have.

Animals do not have this ability. I am always very skeptical of studies of animals. Look at Jane Goodall, these chimps are human beings, when we look at other studies of animals they are just brut dumbless creatures on earth. So, I remain a bit skeptical on this, but we will follow the logical reasoning here of Casseray when we look at an animal world. Well how is the world experienced by a dog? We don't know. But according to many researchers, says Casseray, dogs do not have the ability to abstract themselves from their concrete context and move in their minds forward and backwards across time and space. Dogs react to signs and signals. So if we go to the example everybody knows of Pavlov and his mut. The bell rings, the dog salivates and wants food, because it has associated that bell ringing with food. Now what this means is that the dog has been able to associate ringing with food. It does not mean that the dog can abstract itself from its present circumstance and think, "gee, two weeks ago they gave me a really good meal, I wonder what is on for tonight." The dog can remember, but according to Casseray animals live in a world of discrete events. Whereas human beings are able to move forwards and backwards in time and link together great chains of events, animals can not do that. Each event is experienced as a discrete event and can not be thought about again. So, the dog is able to react to the bell and expect food but cannot remember anything about its previous meals, whether they were nice or not. Would I suppose it being something like us approaching a stop sign? The stop sign immediately triggers a reaction from us, we have to stop. If we were stuck in an animal world, we would never be able to think about the last time we stopped at this stop sign, and remember that the cop was over there so we have to be sure that we stop properly, or that we once ran a stop sign and broadsided something. No, it would be, I see this stop sign and stop without being able to link that event to any other past event.

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Now, it is because of our ability to abstract that we are able to use symbols and to speak a language according to Casseray. Our imaginary worlds are really compilations of ideas that we link together. And it's interesting how we can apply these ideas across space and time, just so easily. As I stand here, I can recall the events of my childhood and I can bring them in to my immediate presence or into present time. I can also think of people I have met in the past whom I hope I never meet again and I can imagine them lingering outside my office door and I can even think of scenarios of how to avoid having to see them. Simply because I can abstract myself from this concrete context and think about things across time and space. It is remarkable that we can move seamlessly over time and over space. And it's a capacity that we take so for granted we hardly ever think about it. But it is a very important capacity if we are to understand something about the nature of our imaginary worlds. It seems to me that this innate capacity which we also link to language is one that awakens slowly over time.

Casseray uses the example of Helen Keller, a particular event from her life to illustrate this idea. Most of us know Helen Keller if only from the Helen Keller jokes of my generation. Helen Keller was a woman, a very intelligent woman, she was around 2 years old, I don't remember, I believe it was meningitis. But at the end of this illness, she was left blind and deaf. Well, let's think about this. The age of two, what kind of a language capacity does a child have, some but not much. You see, as a child develops a child learns how to use present tense but it takes a while for a child to use past tense and then future tense because these symbolic abilities awaken over time. Well all of you probably know the story of Helen Keller, how her parents hired a woman called Ann Sullivan to come work with her. You've probably seen the play Helen Keller ranging around the dinner table, pulling things off plates, and really being quite a beastly child.

But one of the things that Ann Sullivan attempted to do with Helen Keller was to teach her a sign language. This kind of thing where they do the signs on the palms so it can be read that way. Well it seems that for months and months and months and months and months Ann Sullivan had been signing these things into Helen's hand. Water, milk, picture, horse, porch, broom, they didn't mean much to Helen. I'm going to read an excerpt a letter that Ann Sullivan wrote a friend. "Helen has learned that everything has a name and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know. This morning while she was washing, she wanted to know the name for water. When she wants to know the name of anything, she points to it and pats my hand and I spell WATER and thought no more about it until after breakfast. Later on, we went out to the pump house and I made Helen hold her mug under the spout while I pumped. As the cold water gushed forth filling the mug, I spelled WATER in Helen's free hand. The word coming so close upon the sensation of cold water running over her hand seemed to startle her. She dropped the mug and stood transfixed. A new light came into her face. She spelled water several times and then dropped on the ground and asked for its name and pointed to the pump and the trellis and suddenly turning around she asked for my name."

Now, what was this event about? According to Casseray, at this point in time Helen Keller was able to draw upon the principle of abstraction and to be able to use symbols and to understand that WATER was not a discrete event that it stood for water at

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any point in time and space. This transformation that happens so easily to children was quite dramatic in Helen's life because it happened as she was an older child. But it did in fact change her world. This is an interesting and prominent feature of our imaginary worlds. That our ideas we have we can transport across time and space. Well if Thomas Cune is correct and I think that there is some reason to consider that he might be correct, that our lives are always lived within a paradigm, that we may switch from one imaginary world or one paradigm to another but we cannot live in the absence of one. We come to realize that these paradigms are deeply seeded; they are truly a part of us. The ideas that we come to except over our early childhood and youth as being true and correct, those are ideas that stay with us for our lives most often. We have a relationship with those ideas that changes over time. The way we used to think about a particular thing may not be the way we think about it now. These imaginary worlds are so deeply seeded in us that it would be hard for us to even conceive of what it would be like to live in the absence of such an imaginary world.

Now, we move on to the question of how are the ideas of an imaginary world structured or placed together. This I don't know, but there are a few obvious facts about these ideas. The first is that not all ideas are of equal value. Some ideas in an imaginary world are far more important than others but it seems that there will always be a core of ideas upon which everything else is founded. For instance, a student, a question I often ask students when trying to illustrate this point is, within Mormonism what is the most fundamental idea. Most people say restoration by Joseph Smith, Jesus as atoner and savior, but this isn't quite right is it? The most fundamental idea in Mormonism would have to be that God exists, because as an idea, it is logically prior to any other. So we know that in this structure of an imaginary world, some ideas are weightier than others and that there must be some sort of a logical progression among at least some of those ideas, certainly not all of them, but some of those ideas.

I have an overhead here, it's a crude overhead but it is a poor attempt to illustrate this idea. But, here we have a plant and from its bringing a few core ideas, but as they branch out other things grow on them. And that these branches mingle and mix but it's never a static kind of structure. It seems to me that our minds are constantly moving and changing in the interconnections between ideas can be drastically rearranged depending on our experience. Ok, you may turn that off, thank you.

I offer that, and that is about as far as I can go into what this structure might actually look like. But I think that it presents some very interesting and perplexing questions. As I mentioned, I don't think that this structure could be as static because as we encounter new ideas and need to resolve issues that we cannot resolve at the moment, we probably rearrange things and we draw connections between things, we attempt to stretch our imaginary world and pull it and tug it in this way and in that way. I think that we have all been party to very strained analogies, but these strained analogies are really a part and parcel to the way we humans think, because some how we want the elements of our conscious life to fit together even if it fits together in a very uneasy way.

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Somehow in most of our experience we are able to resolve things within our paradigm, to stretch, to rethink, to fit things together in an uneasy way that gives us a guess a bit of a resolution.

Because of this, I think in the past year or so I have become more convinced that ever of the contradictions and paradoxes do not really exist. They only arise as we look at somebody else's thought, somebody else's imaginary world, from a different imaginary world. Because we want to avoid these contradictions and these paradoxes at all costs. And I don't imagine that most of us would be able to think of anything in our imaginary worlds that we would consider truly contradictory or truly paradoxical. I'll give you an example of this from the world of evolution. When it comes to matching theory with data, evolution is a very poor theory. Steven J. Gould recognized this in the fossil record. As evolution would tell us, species evolved at a glacial pace over enormous periods of time. How do evolutionists then deal with the fact that the fact that the fossil record sometimes shows a species not changing for eons, and then boom in the next layer above it a completely different creature?

This bothered Steven J. Gould who of course was at his time the high priest and grand master of evolution, who past away a couple years ago. But he created an idea called punctuated equilibrium. This means that in a very short amount of time an enormous amount of evolution can occur, well this seems to go against basic ideas of evolution. But he wanted to resolve difficulties that the fossil record implied within his own imaginary world, and he did it through this particular idea. It is a very uneasy wedding together of ideas; it is a great stretching perhaps to the breaking point of a particular paradigm. But he did not want the contradiction or the paradox to exist in his imaginary world. This is why I think that paradoxes and contradictions really do not exist within an imaginary world. As I have said, they are products of people looking from the outside and scants another imaginary world. It is not something that we would necessarily or obviously see.

In a manner of speaking then, an imaginary world has life within us. Our relationship with it as I have mentioned changes, it often deepens over a course of a lifetime. Our understanding of the particular ideas of that imaginary world change considerably over time, and over time it becomes so deeply a part of us that we as conscious human beings cannot separate ourselves from our imaginary worlds. In a practical sense, we really cannot separate ourselves from an imaginary world; there is no other world for us.

Now we move onto part three. This I think is the most interesting part. How is it that we human beings come to know the ideas of our imaginary worlds to be true? Those of us who have crossed the globe in doing field work and even those of us who have not, but have talked to another person that has a very different understanding of the nature of things cannot help but be struck at the confidence that people have in the correctness of their ideas. How do we gain that confidence in our ideas? If you look to anthropology, I think that we are deeply led astray. In anthropology it is always ritual. We move people through a ritual, and in the course of that ritual they come to know things to be true. This

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is a Durkheimian idea that has circulated throughout the decades and is still alive and kicking. Read it in Geertz, it may be in his very pretty, pretty, pretty prose, but it is still a stupid idea. Geertz's famous article "Religion as a cultural system" doesn't offer one shred of evidence. There is not one informant who says "yes, I participated in that ritual and now I know these things are true. It is this great anthropological hoax, that if we march through rituals we can now know.

As you can see I'm down on that idea because I don't see any evidence of it, I don't see it any evidence of it in the people I study in south western Africa. So how do we become convinced that our ideas about the fundamental nature of the world are true? As I study and think about this, and I have particularly studied this among the Himba, and I have asked them, I have not assumed, but we marched through ritual A and we are now converts. The answers are really very startling. Answers such as I just know it, one day I understood these things and I know that they are right. What this does is it bespeaks some kind of a deep internal experience. Remember that ritual is external manipulation. It is an attempt to force something from the outside into us. And maybe there are people who come to know things to be true through participating in a ritual, but I think that the vast majority of people do not. They come to know these things, in the kind of epiphanic experience that Circagaurd describes. It is a deeply internal experience, something that happens once in a great while. It is a moment of brilliant clarity, when because we can abstract ourselves from time and space. Our minds recedes from the world for just an instant and we see things that we had not seen before. What we had been taught or thought all along now becomes clear to us, but it becomes clear in a very powerfully persuasive way. I have notes that could go on for about an hour and half but my time is basically up. But I will have to leave it at that.

But I think that I will close this talk by saying that I have found myself that this is a very fruitful area of research, primarily because nobody is interested in doing it. And as I have researched in this, I think I have gained a much greater appreciation of the human being and the kind of worlds that we create and the great frugality of those worlds. We do in fact as we are taught from the scriptures, we live by faith. There is no empirical balance in the sky that we can weigh and truly know particular ideas to be absolutely true in a scientific or empirical sense. And yet, we as human beings know all kinds of things to be true. We know them, I think because of these epiphanic experiences and we are anchored to them through these experiences. And that's it.