

Andean Epistemology: The Nature of Love, Wisdom, and Environmental Concern

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Paper for the Western Social Science Association (2001)

Abstract: The term 'epistemology' represents how a culture defines knowledge, and how it goes about discovering and validating that knowledge. The epistemology of the West supports various approaches to knowledge, including science and religion. No epistemology, however, can encompass the totality of reality. This paper is a report on research by the author (a psychologist) of another epistemology, that of indigenous people living in the high Andes of Peru. Within this Andean* epistemology there are patterns of assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors that offer alternatives not available within our epistemology, and that may be incorporated into Western culture with beneficial results. This paper will focus on the ways in which the Andean epistemology differs from our own regarding the nature of love and wisdom and our relationship with our environment; within the larger context of a challenging attempt to integrate the complementary aspects of the two epistemologies.

For the past seven years I have been involved in a research project with indigenous people who live in isolated villages in the high Andes of Peru, near the old Inca capital of Cuzco. One of the more striking aspects of their lives is the therapeutic way in which they interact with their geography. They engage in meditative-like processes that experientially connect them to nature and that establish a loving and mutually supportive relationship with the non-human world around them. Within this relationship they can call upon their geography to serve as a therapeutic resource for problem resolution and personal growth, and this in turn leads to a sense of intimate connection to the Cosmos, which has additional therapeutic effects. I will begin by describing my experiences with these meditative-like processes and then turn to the issue of what a person operating from within Western epistemology may make of such an approach.

Many of the meditations I have encountered in the Andes involve interacting with elements of nature (e.g. the earth, a river, a tree) with specific therapeutic outcomes in mind. The actual process for connecting with nature--for example a river--was translated as 'blending your spirit with the spirit of the river'. The way to accomplish this blending is through 'intent'. Several different definitions are possible for the term, a useful one is to think of 'intent' as 'sincere pretending'. Through this process of 'sincere pretending' subjectively real experiences emerge. After experiencing the meditations for a period of time I found that the 'pretending' aspect began to recede in favor of an experiential understanding of 'intent' and how to evoke it.

The selection of which element of nature with which to connect depends upon the type of effect that is desired. For example, sitting quietly on the bank of a river you can connect your spirit with that of the river and have your worries, neuroses, and various other problems be gently washed downstream. You can sit with your back against a tree and connect with it to learn how to work with vertical (transcendent) energy, and how to keep rooted while reaching for the stars. You can stand in the wind and can ask it to help you expand your consciousness. As the sun rises in the morning you can ask it to help you focus and mobilize your energy for the tasks you face during

*Note: To make my writing concise I simply refer to 'Andean Epistemology', but I encourage the reader to remember that I am speaking of my experiences within a relatively small area of the Andes. Within that area I have encountered a number of distinct traditions, yet they have a great deal in common. It is regarding their commonalities that I speak.

the day, while at sunset it can help you diffuse your energy in preparation for entering the mysteries of the evening (the unconscious and dream time).

Of all the aspects of nature the one that plays the greatest role in the processes I learned is the 'Pachamama', the great mother who is the planet earth. A simple meditation for beginning an exploration of these processes is to find an appropriate place to sit on the earth, and then just experience sitting in the lap of the Pachamama, the way a child experiences sitting in the lap of a perfectly loving and nourishing mother. Another meditation is to lie on the ground, bare your navel to the earth, and then give the Pachamama all of your problems and worries, or ask her to give you what you need to solve your problems within yourself. These simple processes can lead to peaceful and supportive experiences.

Relationships are bi-directional, and thus within this approach there is a corresponding responsibility for humans to reciprocate the love and nourishment offered by nature. All of the ceremonies I attended in the Andes involved 'despachos', offerings made to various aspects of nature, particularly the Pachamama. These offerings are not payments or bribes to nature for favors granted or requested; they are instead a nourishing of a relationship, as a lover gives flowers to a beloved. This has, in turn, evoked within me and many others involved in this project a greater desire to support the health and well-being of all of nature, not as a moral obligation but as a natural act of caring for a loved one.

In addition to the benefits of calling upon specific aspects of geography for specific therapeutic effects, another level of benefit arises from the general relationship with nature that is engendered by these processes. All of these meditations presuppose that nature can and will support and nourish us; that the earth will absorb our problems, that the river will take away our anxieties, that the wind will expand our consciousnesses, and that a tree will help us become enlightened. This can evoke a strong sense of validation and support for our existence, as children of nature, compared to what we may have experienced as children of Western society. This, in turn, can assuage issues of purpose, meaning, belonging, and connection to life.

But the possibility of forming a bi-directional relationship with nature, e.g. a tree, is hard to fathom from within Western epistemology. Through the contributions of Plato and Aristotle, the Bible, the Cartesian division of spirit and matter, and the subsequent development of scientific materialism we in the West tend to experience reality as if we were isolated consciousnesses interacting with a mechanical and devalued world. In such a reality, loving or respecting a tree is almost as ludicrous as loving a copy machine, and being loved back by the tree is surely impossible. Yet that is the experience that is available in the Andes, for they have an epistemology that supports such a relationship with the natural world.

The Andean epistemology, as I have encountered it, encompasses three ways of 'knowing' about the Cosmos, each associated with a different location within the body: the llankay (located near the navel) directs the energy of the body; the munay (located near the heart) directs the energy of love; and the llachay (located near the crown of the head) directs the energy of mental thought.

The llachay involves the intellect, which I will define as the world of symbolic representations of reality (i.e. words and numbers) and the organization of those representations into structures such as models and theories (in science) or dogma (in Western religion). Of primary concern to the intellect is the determination of the truth or falsity of these symbolic representations. Science and Western religion are primarily products of the llachay.

I know little of the role of the llankay (the center of body energy), as it has not played a

significant part in my training in academia or in Peru. In my limited experience with the martial arts, it would seem to correspond to the Dan Tien, the center of energy that is slightly below the navel. At a cultural level, technology might also be considered to be within the realm of the llankay, as it is an extension of our ability to work within the physical realm.

It is in the area of the heart, the munay, however, that the Andean epistemology provides a loving, bi-directional, relationship with Nature and the rest of the Cosmos. Within Western science the identification of the heart as the center of love is seen as a quaint mistake, but in the Andes it is considered to be literally true. But 'love', in this context, does not refer to the emotion that our culture calls by that name. To understand how the term is being used in the Andean context, 'love' must be separated from any romantic connotations, from any sense of possessiveness (e.g. jealousy), from sentimentality, and from affection. It is better described not as an emotion but as a sensation that arises when your consciousness is centered in the area of your heart.

The difference between the experience of the world that is available in the llachay and the munay is that when we are operating from the yachay (intellect) we tend to experience ourselves as isolated units disconnected from the rest of the Cosmos, but when we are operating from the munay (heart) we have the experience that we are part of a larger whole. This sense of unity with the Cosmos opens up the possibility of experiencing a connection with various aspects of nature. If we define 'wisdom' as the ability to sense our role in the larger systems of which we are a part, and to act with compassion for these systems, then the munay may also serve as a source of wisdom to complement the intelligence of the llachay.

But both the beauty and the drawback of the munay (heart) is that its operations are unfathomable to the llachay (intellect). The intellect can make no sense of the munay and may dismiss its existence or its importance, for the munay produces nothing that can be proven to be true or false. My intellect wants to play by its rules, and if the truth or falsity of the munay cannot be determined then the munay has no value to my llachay. As a psychologist I find it quite easy to translate the mysteries of the munay into the mechanisms of the psyche known to psychology, and thus put the world back within the confines of the llachay. For example, the therapeutic effects of the meditations I have learned in Peru may be due to a placebo response, or they may be the product of therapeutic metaphors (i.e. the river really doesn't have a spirit but the mind responds 'as if' it did). While these approaches serve the logic of science, they also move us away from the beauty of the experience (its true essence), as analytic thinking often does. They discount other ways of knowing found in other cultures, rich aspects of the tapestry of existence.

Fortunately, we are more than the sum of our parts, more than a collection of our various modes of thought. Some aspect of me is meta to the llachay (intellect), meta to the munay (heart), meta to the llankay (body), and meta to the other modes of knowing that probably exist as part of the potential of human experience. At this meta-level of myself--through my experiences in Peru--my munay has established its credentials, to the point where my llachay can only shrug its shoulders and acquiesce gracefully.

So, if I am not going to dismiss the munay as a figment of another culture's imagination, am I to accept both its existence and my experiences of it as real? In a similar vein, are we to accept the existence of a spirit in the river as being literally true, and believe that it is willing to aid us within the context of a loving relationship? We seem to be faced with two options; that the meditation with the river has an effect because of basic psychological mechanisms, or that the river really does have a spirit that is helping us. But remember, the distinction between whether something is literally true or is just a metaphor is purely an intellectual distinction, which applies only to the

realm of the llachay. The munay lies outside that realm.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his efforts to approach the issue of the sacred (in R.E. Donaldson, ed., *A Sacred Unity*, 1991, pp. 265-270), directly addresses this dichotomy. He points out that in the 1500's Catholics and Protestants were killing each other over just such a choice, arguing about whether the wine of the Mass 'really is' the blood of Christ (the Catholic position), or just 'stands for' the blood of Christ in a metaphorical sort of way (the Protestant position). Bateson proposes that both viewpoints are in some sense anti-sacred, that the sacred lies in coming at the issue from another direction. It calls for a mode of thought that is unconcerned with the Aristotelian distinction of true or false--so emphasized in both science and Western religion--and is instead concerned with beauty, harmony, health, and the sacred. This other mode of thought is curiously slippery to conscious analysis and is inexpressible by prose. We know this mode, however, for we use it when we enter a theater to see a play, approach a work of art, stand at a vista and view a sunset, or sit with our backs against a tree.

The challenge, as always, is one of integration. How do we integrate--as individuals and as a society--the munay, the llankay, and the llachay? Such an integration may be crucial to our survival as a species, and the survival of the planet as a place of health and beauty. We have advanced far in the West in terms of our intellect and our technology. We have the intelligence and technology to live on this world in a way that would support its health and beauty, yet we seem to lack the wisdom and heart to do it. It is my experience that the Andean culture has advanced equally far in terms of the munay. If we can bring all of these ways of knowing together, then we may have not only the intelligence and means of achieving this end, we may also have the wisdom and heart to do it. Two weeks ago I asked a paq'o in Peru how to integrate these apparently orthogonal aspects of myself. His advice may apply to the greater-than-individual level as well. He said "love and honor them all".

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