

Amerindian Indigenous peoples' theories of mind and Panpsychism. A dialogue between opposite ontologies.

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Abstract. The Western theories of mind were born with the intent to solve a problem raised in the 17th century: how do mind and body relate to each other despite their diametrical differences? What is accepted today as a fact is that the mind is nothing more than a product of the brain, or so it says materialism, the vastly advocated theory of mind that leaves, however, that same very question out of its sphere of explanation. But that is not the case for indigenous people, especially Amerindian ones, who are the focus of this work. Their theories of mind are fully integrated with their ontologies. In fact, the mind is naturalized to a point where relationships with other nonhuman beings are a fundamental part of their everyday life. However, there is a convergence to be made, and that is between Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind and Panpsychism, a theory of mind that has a long history that goes as far as the origin of Philosophy itself. Therefore, beyond culturalism, an ontological approach should be considered when analyzing such indigenous theories of mind because their fitness to their ontologies and cosmologies seems to demonstrate such a naturalization of the mind that the West is still trying to achieve.

Keywords. Amerindian peoples, panpsychism, theory of mind.

1. Introduction

To think about a theory of mind implies that the mind is something that despite its undeniable existence needs to be explained. That is why Western ontologies have developed several theories of mind, including ones that are completely opposed to each other and ones that even deny the autonomy of the mind and its events, like consciousness. However, is this need for explanation present across every ontology? Do indigenous peoples also face this same demand as Westerners do regarding the ontological status of the mind? As we will see, they do not seem to have this same impasse as we Westerners do.

Especially, Amerindian indigenous peoples - which are the focus of this paper - live in realities that are able to accommodate the mind without further questioning whether it is a consistent and autonomous part of their worlds, it simply is. And this can be shown through, for example, the importance of the shamanic rituals, in which the mind shows its full autonomy from the body; the presence of a thorough spirit or soul that pervades beings that are nonhumans; and the fact that beyond a theory of mind, they seem to have a comprehensive understanding of the mind that does not separate it

from action and practical knowledge.

However, this paper is not only about the differences between Amerindian indigenous peoples and Western ontologies of the mind. What I intend to do is mainly to show that through Panpsychism - a theory of mind that has some strong advocates - we can point to a convergence between these two realities that present such opposite comprehensions of the mind. By doing so I hope to shed a light on the Western need for an explanation of the mind by demonstrating that the Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind do have a saying about the matter that should be taken very seriously.

2. What is a "theory of mind"?

When we think about the expression "theory of mind" we must analyze both of its terms: "theory" and "mind". The first gives us a sense of a systematic and scientifically construed thinking, something we do theoretically, an explanation about some matter. A theory of mind then would be the assembly of statements and accounts that clarify what the mind is.

This way of thinking has its *raison d'être* in the fact

that in the West we come to know something by separating subject and object. To know is to objectify and even the subject only knows itself when it comes to seeing itself objectively as something other than itself (1). In this sense, a theory of mind intends to explain the mind by putting it in perspective to itself, i.e. the subject is also object. This movement suggests that the mind is a strange entity that needs to be understood by means of a scientific approach.

This strangeness caused by the mind is due to the fact that it is not conceivable like the body is, and that is because we need a theory of mind. After all, we know that the mind exists, but it cannot be explained like the body can. By developing a theory of mind, we are trying to make sense of two opposite things, according to our ontology, that exist: the body and the mind. And as we are going to see next the Western way of thinking the mind cannot conceive that both of them, mind and body, exist together without reducing the former to the latter.

2.1 The Cartesian Conundrum

The ground rule among Western theories of mind is the separation of mind and body. This tradition of thinking goes back to Plato (428 - 348 BC) and his splitting of the material and ideal forms worlds. But it was René Descartes (1596 - 1650) who introduced a proper theory of mind that conceptualized it as a separate and independent entity, i.e. a substance, that exists closer to the body, the only other substance that exists, than a salesman to its boat. That is because, according to Descartes, the mind has no extension and it is private, i.e. can only be fully known by its owner; whereas the body indeed has extension and is public, i.e. is accessible to anyone.

However, despite all that, mind and body communicate with each other, and that can be proved through anyone's everyday life: a pinprick in my arm is sensed by my body with pain, a mental event, in that very same spot; and my will, another mental event, to wake up in the morning makes my body to move accordingly.

Nevertheless, if mind and body are indeed two opposed substances, how do they communicate with each other? That is the great conundrum that was raised by Cartesianism and that every theory of mind tries to solve. In this sense, one of the great intentions of Western theories of mind is to conciliate mind and body, despite their opposite differences.

2.2 Is there an indigenous theory of mind?

The first thing we perceive when studying the indigenous theories of mind, in this case, Amerindian indigenous peoples' ones, is the lack of information about the topic, which could be due to two factors. The first one being the insufficient research in the field (2). Besides, the information that can be found in some studies briefly mention the interpretations that indigenous peoples have about the mind, as if this topic were of no interest to anthropologists and ethnographers (2). In fact, the pieces of material that can be found on the subject do not even mention the

mind itself, but only consciousness and its related terms soul and spirit. The second factor would be that indigenous peoples' interpretations of mind do not present the same impasse Western ones do. Meaning that they do not have a conceiving problem about the existence of two different and opposite realms of reality, mind and body.

As we will see, Amerindian indigenous peoples' comprehension of the mind integrate it with their whole worlds. For them, just as there are bodies, there are minds. Their ontologies cultivate the acceptance of the possibility of the existence of the two realms of reality that Western culture cannot conceive. The mind is a part of their realities just as the body is, and the former is not reduced by any means to the latter. Therefore, Amerindian indigenous peoples do not have the need to develop a theory that explains the mind, because the mind is not a strange entity.

This can be demonstrated by the significance of shamanic ceremonies, wherein the mind exhibits complete independence from the physical form; the existence of a profound essence or spirit imbuing entities beyond humans; and the notion that they possess a holistic grasp of the mind, integrating it seamlessly with action and pragmatic wisdom, rather than isolating it into mere theory.

3. Panpsychism and Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind

3.1 Panpsychism

Panpsychism can be understood through three intertwined ideas: the entire universe is a living organism, every entity within it is alive, and even the matter itself is animated (3). However, it is not a monolithic theory, unfolding itself into some different possibilities. Nonetheless, it can be said that, in general, Panpsychism is the thesis that argues that the universe as a whole is conscious at different levels, therefore consciousness is ubiquitous in the universe.

The origin of Panpsychism and of Philosophy itself are intertwined. For example, Thales (324 - 546 B.C.) argued that self-mobile beings, such as magneto and amber, contain in themselves some kind of mental activity (4). Plato himself, beyond his divide between the ideal and material worlds, saw a spiritual foundation across the entire existence that justifies the possibility of knowledge, i.e. the intellect and object adequacy, by the human spirit (5). Aristotle (384 - 322 B.C.) criticized some of his predecessors because they had only investigated the soul within the human domain, and his approach studied the subject considering living beings in general (6). Other philosophers who developed what can be said to be Panpsychism were, for example, Spinoza (1632 - 1677) and his theory of God's emanation; Leibniz (1646 - 1716) and his substance called monad; and Schelling (1775 - 1854) and his theory that nature

and spirit are immanent unfoldings of the same reality.

3.2 Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind

Concerning Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind, the first thing we have to notice is that, as I already stated before, they do not seem to have a theory of mind per se. However, we can imply some interpretations they have on the subject by analyzing the way they develop their knowledge and relate to their environment and other living and non-living beings. Moreover, it appears that they also do not have a scientific concept of the mind itself - a set of processes carried out by the encephalon, which include motor and cognitive activities such as thinking, language, and art (7). It appears that the concept of mind they have is more like a spirit or soul that pervades everything. Nonetheless, these are terms that are themselves problematic because they derive from Western religion's vocabulary, i.e. Christian tradition, and their meaning is not commensurable with the Amerindian indigenous peoples' concepts, like the Yanomami term *xapiri* (8). Besides, a difficulty faced by anthropologists is the possibility that translations of meanings from native languages do not reveal the semantic nuances, as it is quite common that indigenous peoples refer to what we call consciousness, soul, or spirit in metaphorical ways (2). The more accurate term then would be agency, which can be understood as a being, human or nonhuman, that is capable of acting and producing an effect toward a particular result. Having all that in mind, let's delve into some of the theories Amerindian indigenous peoples have about the mind.

3.3 Carib-speaking Amerindians

Carib-speaking Amerindians' ontology encompasses a diverse range of beings and multiple co-existent worlds (9). Their cosmology has two main characteristics: some of what we would call mind events or aspects, like intentionality and agentivity, are not restricted to humans, they are present also in some objects, spirits, natural phenomena, animals, and plants; and relations, interactions, and communication with all these beings are cultivated, existing a real possibility of transforming into and becoming the other (9).

In this sense, it can be said that for Carib-speaking Amerindians animals are considered as people, and plants, spirits, and some objects are also personified and animated in different degrees (9). Also, for them, human persons may have different spiritual aspects inhabiting different body parts, such as the heart and the eyes, which indicates an internal multiplicity that is not reducible to a binary distinction (9). This challenges the Western concept of a human being composed of two opposed entities: body and soul.

For example, for the Yukpa, animals once were Yukpa-pe, which means "Yukpa-like", and their shamans are able to willingly communicate with

other species. Their ontology states a common spirit interiority throughout nature uniting beings beyond humans. So, persons, whether human or nonhuman, are not divided into two realms: nature/culture or body/soul. Instead, they are "multidividuals" that are not reducible to a binary distinction (9).

3.4 Amazonian Amerindians

For Amazonian Amerindian peoples, humanity is the original common condition of humans and nonhumans. For example, in the Campa mythology, the first humans transformed one by one into other species of animals and also plants, as well as astronomical bodies and features of the terrain (1). In this sense, the bodily form of each species is only an envelope concealing a humanity only visible to the ones of the particular species and shamans. That is why the relations between humans and the so-called nature can be interpreted as social relations: plants and game animals may be conceived as relatives, affines, or enemies (1).

The Ávila Runa consider that all beings are actually selves, beings that have a point of view and they relate to each other in a social environment that can be named an "ecology of selves" (10). This means that aspects we consider to be present only in the human mind, like representation, intention, and purpose, even if it be in their basic forms, emerge wherever there is life. In other words, significance is not related only to humans (10).

Regarding the presence of agency in some features of the terrain, some peoples from Ecuador, Colombia, and certain regions of the Andes, talk and exchange gifts and affection with the mountains that sometimes couple with each other forming families of mountains. For the Krenak, the Watu, Doce River, is their grandfather, indeed a person, not a resource to be exploited (11).

The presence of a certain agency in nonhuman beings can also be illustrated by how Amerindian indigenous peoples construct their knowledge. For instance, for the Apurinã, the sounds of the animals in general inform them about game animals and foretell storms and rains, forthcoming fights between people, and even attacks of animals. These animals that bring information are seen as their ancient shamans, or specific ones, that have transformed themselves into animals (12). Another example are the Manchineri, whose shamanic visions and chanting are a valid source of knowledge, one that is of absolute relevance to their decision-making. On one hand, shamanic visions are about relating and transforming into the Other; on the other hand, chanting is an important method of communication with animals and plants (12). For the Ávila Runa dreaming is a privileged mode of communication between the souls of humans and nonhumans, in the sense that in a dream the soul detaches itself from the body and interacts with the souls of other beings, which demonstrates a spanning of the temporal domains and states of consciousness (10).

Other conceptualizations of the consciousness, soul, or spirit include the assumption of one common universal source of consciousness for all beings, for example in the Kogi ontology, in the sense that an individual's consciousness is not a product of the human brain, but rather an expression of a cosmic consciousness that is the source of life and intelligence inside nature (2).

Even the forest has forces and entities with sufficient agency to influence hunting activities. For many Amazonian Amerindian peoples, Panema can be defined as a certain type of relation between beings, usually the one concerning humans and their prey. When a hunter or anyone in the predatory chain disrespects the prey's body, there is, consequently, an abrupt diminishing of the predatory potency (13). Caipora, on the other hand, is a being related to the constant care of human preys and the intermediation between them. Its role is to control the quantity of each animal species in the forest. If Caipora is respected, the hunters may have success in capturing the prey (13).

4. The need for an ontological approach

As we were able to see, Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind have a lot to do with Panpsychism, showing that their and Western interpretations of the subject are not indeed as alike as they might seem at first glance. Panpsychism also has the advantage of going beyond the dualist and materialist points of view and offers a solution that naturalizes the mind and integrates it with reality, making it a part of our world just as the body also is. Of course, Panpsychism considers consciousness to be ubiquitous in the universe, not exactly the mind itself. However, consciousness is a mental event, and so, in that sense, we can consider that a certain mental activity is present throughout the entire existence. And that is what Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind also demonstrate: that some kind of agency or, we could say, consciousness makes itself present in both human and nonhuman beings.

That is why when studying indigenous concepts and interpretations of the mind we need to take the ontological approach, which gets us out of the absurdity of culturalism and its point of view that indigenous people are mistaken (9). On the contrary, their theories and interpretations are as suitable to their ontologies, which do not separate mind from body, as dualism once was to ours, and as materialism now is. However, materialism does not solve all problems of dualist theories, giving us a solid correlational science, but leaving outside of its sphere of explanation much of what Cartesianism left as inquiry. So much so that we do not know how to place consciousness, a key aspect of the mind, in our theories. And as we were able to see, that does not happen with Amerindian indigenous peoples' theories of mind because the mind, just like the body, is integrated throughout their entire existence.

Science itself is so diverse in its practices and views that much of it is frequently in disagreement. Its universality or unity is more an ideal than an actual reality (8). That is why other forms of knowledge, that are based on different and sometimes incommensurable ontologies, may be better at explaining certain aspects of reality. If there come to be paradoxes in the way we interpret non-Western understandings of reality, we must reevaluate our own concepts, what things are to us: "What is a stone for it to have a soul or a spirit?"; "What is a soul or a spirit for it to be in a stone?" (8).

5. Conclusion

It can be drawn as a conclusion that for the Amerindian indigenous peoples, the mind is not something that exists for itself, like in the Cartesian dualism, nor is it a merely product of the brain, as for materialism and the neurosciences. The mind, or its correlates – consciousness, soul, or spirit – only exists in relation to everything else, including nonhuman beings. And because their entire worlds are based on relations, every being – animal, plant, features of the terrain – has its own selfhood and can be said to have certain degrees of agency.

In this sense, although Amerindian indigenous peoples do not have theories of mind per se, from what has been exposed in this paper we can see some similarities with Panpsychism. There are indeed two aspects of Panpsychism that are strongly present across every ontology we analyze: the entire universe is a living organism and every entity within it is alive.

Of course, these conclusions are based on a research that was conducted by analyzing Amerindian indigenous peoples' ways of knowledge-construction and of relating to their environment. For the most part, there was no information regarding what are their specific considerations about the mind itself, either because of the lack of information on that matter or because, as I argued before, their ontologies naturally integrate the mind into their worlds. Either way, I would suggest more research on the specifics of what is or what could mean an Amerindian indigenous people's theory of mind.

To conclude, I would say that what makes it so difficult for us, sons and daughters of Western science, to understand and grasp the kind of reality that the mind represents is our dualistic ontology. At the base of our knowledge-construction is the idea that certain parts of our reality are more real than others, only because we can measure and predict them. However, just think about what theorists of quantum physics and superstring theory are saying, and it will become clear that what constitutes our worlds is not matter, is not stuff, but relations (1).

6. References

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