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**Author(s):** Vine Deloria, Jr.

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# GUEST EDITORIAL

## American Indian Metaphysics

Vine Deloria, Jr.  
American Indian Studies  
University of Arizona, Tucson



For many centuries, whites scorned the knowledge of American Indians, regarding whatever the people said as gross savage superstition and insisting that their own view of the world, a complex mixture of folklore, religious doctrine, and Greek natural science, was the highest intellectual achievement of our species. This posture of arrogance produced some classic chapters in the history of the western hemisphere: Ponce de Leon wandering around the southeastern United States vainly searching for the Fountain of Youth, Swedish immigrants on the Delaware River importing food for thirty years because they could not grow anything in this country, and the Donner party resorting to cannibalism because of their fear of the local Indians.

In recent years, there has been an awakening to the fact that Indian tribes possessed considerable knowledge about the natural world. Unfortunately, much of this appreciation has come too late for anyone, white or Indian, to recapture some of the most important information on lands, plants, and animals of the continent. In a parallel but unrelated develop-

ment, Indian religious traditions are now of major interest to whites whose own religious traditions have either vanished or been swamped in reactionary fundamentalism. Fluctuating between a recognition of practical knowledge about the world possessed by Indians and outright admiration for their sense of the religious is unsettling and nonproductive; it does not attribute to Indians any consistency, nor does it suggest that their views of the natural world and religious reality had any more correspondence and compatibility than do western religion and its science. Instead of talking of an Indian "science" or even an Indian "religion," we should focus our attention on the metaphysics possessed by most American Indian tribes and derive from this central perspective the information and beliefs which naturally flowed from it.

Metaphysics has had a difficult time regaining its intellectual respectability in western circles. Its conclusions were greatly abused by generations of Europeans who committed what Alfred North Whitehead called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," which is to say that, after they reached the conclusions to which their premises had led them, they came to believe they had accurately described ultimate reality. Metaphysics need not bear the burden of its past, however, if we understand it as simply that set of first principles which we must possess in order to make sense of the world in which we live. In this sense, the Indian knowledge of the natural world, of the human world, and of whatever realities exist beyond our senses has a consistency which far surpasses anything devised by western civilization.

The best description of the Indian metaphysics was the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related. This world was a unified world, a far cry from the disjointed and sterile world painted by western science. Even though we can translate the realities of that world into concepts familiar to us from the western scientific context, such as space, time, and energy, the Indian world can be said to consist of two basic experiential dimensions which, taken together, provided a sufficient means of making sense of the world. These two concepts were *place* and *power*, perhaps better defined as spiritual power or life force. Familiarity with the personality of objects and entities of the natural world enabled Indians to discern immediately where each living being had its proper place and what kinds of experiences that place allowed, encouraged, and suggested.

Western scientists frequently suggest that the Indian way of looking at the world lacked precision because it was not capable of nor interested in mathematical descriptions of nature. But, as Carl Jung pointed out with respect to the so-called primitive mind, once a person knew the places of things, a mere glance was sufficient to replace counting and, in most instances, was more accurate. The Indian mind was considerably more interested in learning the psychological characteristics of things than in describing their morphological structure. Hence, in some instances when defining common personality traits which men and animals shared,

the Indian seemed to be talking nonsense. Today, as western science edges ever closer to acknowledging the intangible, spiritual quality of matter and the intelligence of animals, the Indian view appears increasingly more sophisticated.

Indian students today are confronted with a monolith of western science when they leave the reservation to attend college. In most introductory courses, their culture and traditions are derided as mere remnants of a superstitious, stone-age mentality which could not understand or distinguish between the simplest of propositions. Additionally, they are taught that science is an objective and precise task performed by specialists who carefully weigh the propositions which come before them. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Western science traditionally represents the consensus of the established scientists who almost always reject new ideas out of hand. Much of the progress made by western science has been made by amateurs and martyrs who have been derided and cursed in their lifetime, only to be canonized by a new generation which has learned to accept the smallest of changes with more grace than their fathers and teachers.

Indian students are further misled by outrageous claims made by science which suggest that the various fields of inquiry, if taken together, represent the sum total of human knowledge. In fact, almost all of western science is reductionist in nature and seeks to force natural experience and knowledge into predetermined categories which ultimately fail to describe or explain

anything. The whole process of science is that of finding common denominators which can describe large amounts of data in the most general terms, rejecting anything which refuses easy classification as "anomalous," existing outside the generally accepted labels and, therefore, not to be given standing or serious attention. This way of gathering information about the world—and ourselves—is, of course, absurd.

One of the most painful experiences for American Indian students is to come into conflict with the teachings of science which purport to explain phenomena already explained by tribal knowledge and tradition. The assumption of the western educational system is that the information dispensed by colleges is always correct, and the beliefs or teachings of the tribe are always wrong. Rarely is this the case. The teachings of the tribe are almost always more complete, but they are oriented toward a far greater understanding of reality than is scientific knowledge. And precise tribal knowledge almost always has a better predictability factor than does modern science, which generally operates in sophisticated tautologies that seek only to confirm preexisting identities.

We live in an industrial, technological world in which a knowledge of science is often the key to employment and many times is essential in understanding how the larger society views and uses the natural world—including, unfortunately, people and animals. Western science has no moral basis and is entirely incapable of resolving human problems except by

the device of making humans act more and more like machines. Therefore, Indian students, as they study science and engineering, should take time and make the effort to regain a firm knowledge of traditional tribal lore. Even if many of the stories seem impossible under existing scientific explanation of phenomena, Indian students should not easily discard what their tribes have traditionally believed. There is most assuredly a profound knowledge present in many things which the tribes have preserved.

Richard Ford's article on "Science in Native America" is a good representative piece recognizing the knowledge of Indians. It fairly surveys the various aspects of knowledge which Indians had and gives reasonable explanations of some of the ways in which our ancestors understood natural phenomena. Considering the present state of things, it is important for scholars such as Ford to begin to help us break the ice of ignorance and neglect which has been thrust upon our traditions for nearly half a millenium. Without the voices of respected white scholars, there is little chance that we can get sufficient attention from the scientific establishment in order to plead our own case. But we must remember that every article which attempts to discuss this problem should be understood as a call for each of us to enter into the exchange of knowledge. In this sense, Ford calls us, as Native Americans, to become more truly scientific—to offer our knowledge to the larger benefit of our species.

