

## **Coming Around Again: Cyclical and Circular Aspects of Native American Thought**

B. Steve Csaki  
East Central University

Before I begin my discussion of circularity and cyclical aspects of native thought and the importance of them, I think it would be helpful for me to explain what I mean by these terms, and why it is that I believe that they are both of great significance, yet largely ignored and/or undervalued by contemporary Western philosophers. By definition, when I say “circularity,” I do not mean strictly the geometric version of a perfect circle that has 360 degrees, a diameter of  $2\pi r$ , etc. What I mean is rather a much broader interpretation of circular, that is to say almost anything that has a beginning point and end point that are the same. I’ll use the term “cyclical” to refer to instances of similarity that recur with some regularity, like the intervals between day and night, or the phases of the moon for instances.

I have long been interested in circularity and the cyclical order of things, but more recently these issues have become a central, and unavoidable part of my life. I am a “semi-retired philosopher” who has been ranching full-time for the past ten years here in Oklahoma. What this means is that I spend an inordinate amount of my time making circles in fields, whether it is cutting hay, raking it, baling it, or putting seed in the ground for next year, I just go round and round – and I think. Sometimes I think about the fact that all this machinery that I use is based on circularity. The tractor’s engine turns, which drives the PTO that turns gears which spin various parts of the different machines that I use. I often hope that none of the many bearings in the equipment will overheat and fail from so much turning and spinning – because then I’ll have to replace them.

All of these circles are made so that there can be feed for the cattle for the winter and they can have their calves again in the Spring. If all goes well, the cycle will repeat itself next year. Just because I spend my time in this particular occupation does not mean that I am alone in making all these circles every day. Think about your life and how it goes.

Most people get up, go through some morning ritual, and then go to work, school, or somewhere else and later on return home and sleep in the same bed that they left in the morning. That is a circle made. The cycle then repeats itself the next day. Let me say that this is just barely scratching the surface when it comes to the observable circular and cyclical aspects of the world as it is. We, by and large, ignore these, let alone delve deeper.

But let's do delve a little deeper. When we eat there is a digestive process that is both circular and cyclical. Most of our organs have some circular aspect. Our eyes, with which we see this world, are round as are our mouths. Our schedules, with respect to eating and all other activities are largely determined by the regular rotation of the earth, which just happens to be a sphere that is both spinning and rotating around a much larger, hotter sphere. While I realize that I have just made a jump from that which is easily recognizable and that which is not (so much), there is ample evidence of things circular and cyclical available to our senses that it is not actually necessary to move very far beyond them to support my position – even though it is easy to do. I could go on and on with more everyday examples, but I'm sure you get the gist by now and hopefully you'll continue to think of other examples. I promise you that they are everywhere, you need only look and think to find them.

What I find most fascinating is the fact that virtually everyone, philosophers included, seem to take all of this, not only for granted, but even more incomprehensibly to me, as not particularly meaningful. If something is everywhere and seems to underlie everything, shouldn't it be hugely important and treated as such? Or, to put the same question into more philosophical terms, if accurate, the notion of circularity as a central aspect of reality must inform our metaphysical and ontological understanding of the world.

Native American thinkers understand circularity to be centrally important to understanding the world. As Donald Fixico asserts,

The circle of life includes all things and they consist of spiritual energy. All around us are circles and cycles. The migration patterns of animals and cycles of seasons are part of the Natural Order of Life. The four elements of fire, water, wind, and Earth are part of the Muscogee Creek ethos and the same four elements are part of many tribes. From these concepts derives the American Indian thought for those Native Americans who believe in their traditions. (42)

Now there are a couple of important issues that need to be investigated with respect to these claims. First, how does a worldview such as this arise, and secondly – and arguably of more significance from a strictly philosophical point of view – what are the ramifications such a view holds for those who embrace it?

The first issue can be answered in a straightforward manner, and I have already suggested that understanding the importance of the circles and cycles of life requires merely paying attention. Native Americans built their understanding of the world through more than merely paying attention. They acutely paid attention and allowed what they observed to help direct the way that they lived, and this obviously aided in their survival. This attitude towards the world is so important that it bears further investigation.

Allowing the observable phenomena in the world to guide behavior in that world sounds quite reasonable on the surface. What is striking is the stark contrast that one finds

if we look at the contemporary Western approach to living in the world. In that view, ideas are generated that are often independent of, or even contrary to, what we see happening in the world, and then those ideas are imposed upon the world.<sup>1</sup> The outcomes are predictably absurd.

A concrete example – excuse the pun – of the above is the city of New Orleans. Why should we consider that the location of the city is actually below sea level in terms of that being a good spot to build? That’s not a problem. We can just build levees and pumps and make it what and where we want it to be. Well, we all know how that worked out, but don’t worry now we’ve fixed the problem.

Fixico and others have argued that the reason behind the stark contrast we see in methodologies and beliefs with respect to how to function best in the world begins with how we understand the world. The Western approach sees and understands the world as fundamentally linear in nature, while the Native American approach sees circularity and cyclical aspects as the basis for understanding how things are.

While I agree with these thinkers that this assertion is generally correct, there are a couple of caveats that I would insist we ought not gloss over at the risk of oversimplification. First, I argue that it is critically important to note that the western approach identified above is one that must be understood as post-Christian. The early Greeks valued the notion of circularity and recognized the essential nature of various cyclical aspects of the world. The notion of “anime,” or soul, as a life-giving principle was perfectly suited to the idea of life and death as an intertwined cycle. When something died, that which made it alive just left, but it did not disappear. This notion made thinkers question what might become of this life-giving force after death. Plato even went so far as to suggest the possibility that souls could be literally reincarnated, but their memories would be wiped clean beforehand.

It is actually part of this idea that the Christian thinkers later adopted but adapted to suit their view that humans are not of, and other than, this earth. From Plato, they took the idea of an immortal soul, but for Christians this was an individual soul that retained all memories and remained completely intact for eternity. In other words, when I die, *I* go to heaven, purgatory, or Hell. Plato had only hinted that a soul might accidentally retain some of its memories of what he argued were universal truths (not individual ones) and he presented this idea as a myth, not as any kind of fact. Later, the Christians saw this idea as an excellent basis for the notion that an individual soul lasts forever in an unchanging state.

---

<sup>1</sup> This mode of living and learning is only possible because of the “unnatural” relationship most people today have with the world in which they live. For most people who live in cities food comes from the grocery store or a restaurant. The notion of killing something in order to eat it is so foreign to many people that when they truly think about what that means they might become vegetarians, but most do not think about it. It is in this sort of environment that it is possible to believe that we need merely assert our ideas over the realities of nature or the world.

This is important because, in my view, it is the basis for what Fixico refers to as the linear world. In the Christian worldview, the most important occurrence is linear. A person is born and then moves through life with a specific goal or end. That end actually comes after death and lasts for all of eternity, but is understood as *the* end point, the desired goal in fact. So, from a Christian perspective, in life people move from point A at birth to point B in the afterlife. That makes for a linear or straight line. This is most certainly a linear view of reality and carries with it many troubling implications for how and why people should interact with the world. This worldview is the mainstream view in America today.

The second caveat that I argue should be made with respect to a linear versus circular view of the world is that there are long traditions and great numbers of people associated with those traditions who do not understand the world as linear. Hindus and a great many Buddhist sects understand, value, and have placed the cyclical nature of the world as the primary mode of understanding the world and their place in it. Suffice it to say that this is evident in the way their religions function and in their attitudes towards the world and their interrelations with it.

At this point it is safe to say that Native Americans came to understand that the most fundamental way the world functions is circular and cyclical because they observed that this was the case. They did not apply theory to reality, but rather allowed reality to inform their beliefs. This sounds straightforward and ironically enough seems to match the Western scientific tradition, which is so often used in a seemingly contradictory manner. I would also argue that the scientific approach has been tainted by linear thinking that ought not be in its methodology, but that argument is for another day.

So, if Native thought is derived from observing the world, and noting how it functions in actuality is the answer to the first question that was posed of how this way of understanding the world emerged, then we are left with the second, more critical question, how does such a view of the world inform and affect ones interaction with it.

Fixico writes that,

In circular philosophy, all things are related and involved in the broad scope of Indian life. As part of their life ways, the indigenous peoples of the Americas have studied the Earth, observed the heavenly bodies and contemplated the stars of the universe. The Mayans recorded a calendar based on the number of new moons in a year. The Lakota completed an astronomy about the heavenly bodies, and the Muscogee Creeks incorporated the stars and galaxies into their ethos of the universe. All such things are in a vast continuum that Albert Einstein referred to as circular in form. (42)

To me, the most significant portion of the claim that Fixico makes above is the fact that from the stars to each one of us there is a continuum. This view of all things as intricately

connected to one another, even with vast distances obvious between them, is a remarkable way to understand the world.

Here I am sorely tempted to add “and what’s beyond it,” but were I to do so I would actually be falling back into a more contemporary Western linear view of the world where the “world” is somehow distinct from the universe that is beyond (in the sense of “other than”) it. The point here is that we are connected to each and everything from this room outward until we reach even farther than we can see. All that is must be understood as related to us.

At this point one might object that it is not at all clear how we have gone from circles and cycles to the notion that all things are interconnected. After all, circles can be used to separate things and contain them can’t they and aren’t they? This fact actually strikes me as one of the most intriguing aspects of this discussion because in Native American thought, as elsewhere, circles can be and are used both as lines of demarcation of separation *and* as indicators of relatedness. This certainly seems contradictory on the surface, but if we think in terms beyond two dimensions it becomes less so.

First, it is important to realize that in viewing the world in terms of circularity while the circle can serve the purpose of separation in the sense of understanding, the location of that circle is always within a greater circle and therefore part of something else. An example that Ed McGaa offers is to view the human soul as a “great Disk of Life” (Fixico 42), which is within us and includes much of what we are and yet is only part of what we are, even if a crucial part. This is part of the way of understanding how circularity is both inclusive and exclusive simultaneously.

In our efforts to explain the nature of things intellectually, circles can be used as a means to facilitate understanding of the relations between things. Thus, we can establish various circles in order to understand the “true” nature of things. At the same time, this is not to say that these sorts of circles do not actually exist. Take for example a circle of people around a campfire, that circle exists and forms a separation between what or who is in the circle and what or who is not, yet anyone or anything can cross into or out of that circle. In this example the circle may represent where or with whom we belong, and that is not necessarily an absolute and permanent location, yet it helps to define the “us and them” at any particular point in time.

Circles in Native thought are dynamic. The dynamism includes motion and change. This is a critically important point and it is not clearly obvious. Cyclical events are by their very nature connected to movement, motion, and change, but circles strike us as somehow fixed and rigid. With our western educations, when we think of circles we tend to think of the geometric shape that, by definition, never changes. That is not the circle of Native American thought. Here is where the relationship between cycle and circle in Native thought – which is movement – is central to understanding the consequences of adopting such a worldview.

One of the reasons that Fixico identifies western thought as linear and juxtaposes it to a circular view of the world has to do with this dynamic aspect of Native thought. Or perhaps it is better stated that a linear view of the world sees all movement as forward and unidirectional. In other words, contemporary western thinkers see progress as movement in one direction and that is towards a goal – be it an immediate goal, or some ultimate ideal. If a person is schooled in this mode of thought, it is profoundly strange and even disturbing to think that progress could be viewed as a movement that actually can, and often does, turn back onto itself. The very notion seems contradictory to what is supposed to be the truth from a contemporary western view.

So here we see that there are two clear results of owning or adopting a circular and cyclical view of the world. The first is that the way that a goal is achieved may not be in a linear or straightforward fashion. It may be that a circuitous route is the best or only option to get from here to there.

Here I have to share a personal story about one of my stepmothers. This was stepmother number one, and she had not been married to my father for very long at the time, so she was still going hunting with him. They were hunting pheasants in Kansas or Iowa and came to an area that had some standing water. My father suggested they go around it. My stepmother told my father that she was getting tired of walking and that the shortest and best route was straight across the wet area because everyone knows that the shortest distance between point A and point B is a straight line. My father said that he preferred going around and taking the long way. My stepmother went straight ahead as she said she would, and once she entered the water she sank to her waist. From this story everyone in my family understands that Euclidean geometry works much better on two-dimensional paper than it does in reality because unless you can walk on water, you can't make a straight line across it.

The purpose of my story, beyond a little levity, is twofold. First, I hope that it illustrates the simple fact that a linear approach is one that may often be at odds with reality as we find it, whereas a circular or cyclical one is much more adaptable and therefore suitable to reality – since that is where the idea originated. Second, it is an illustration of one kind of knowledge that is based on circularity. As Thomas Norton-Smith states:

Circularity can be seen in the verification of knowledge, for we have seen that Tribal tradition is one way to verify that an action, procedure or performance is respectfully successful in achieving a goal. We can easily imagine a tribal elder explaining that, “this way has always worked, so we'll do it that way now, and will you pass it down to your children.” And the transmission of knowledge is, as well, circular in form. (127)

Norton-Smith is echoing both issues that I am trying to illustrate with my story here. First, repetition is a form of circularity and is a primary way, if not *the* primary way by which we all learn things about the world. Second, by telling stories we can inform others

so that they do not have to go through all the circles themselves. This approach makes the acquisition of useful knowledge much more efficient and the elders as a group act as a living storehouse of information.

Ultimately, while we have only scratched the surface of this subject matter, what has become evident so far, is that there are two clear results of adopting or holding a circular and cyclical understanding of the world. First, we are required to pay attention to the world and look for those things that occur and recur. In so doing, we can understand that all things are ultimately connected even in their apparent diversity. Second, we see a somewhat different or older version of the transmission of knowledge that advances knowledge within a pattern of repetition. Thus experience, hence a person's age, is valued above the passions of youth. While I've identified these two consequences of holding a circular view of the world as of particular interest, it is important to note that because each consequence is related to knowing and understanding the world there is bound to be a ripple effect in terms of many other areas of life (ethics, environmental ethics, epistemology, etc.) that are affected by this worldview.

### Works Cited

- Cordova, V. F. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova*. Ed. Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, and Amber Lacy. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007.
- Fixico, Donald Lee. *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World*. New York: Routledge. 2003.
- Norton-Smith, Thomas M. *The Dance of Person and Place*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 2010.