

Values, Philosophy and Religious Studies.....

# Dialogue

## Australasia

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**Engaging** Sceptical Minds with **Ultimate** Questions  
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# Considering Ultimate Questions from an Indigenous Perspective

I talk to myself.

Internal arguments about how useful, true, or likely something is, keep me awake some nights and cause me to vacillate instead of making important decisions that I trust absolutely. It's as though I have two people in my head, both usually rational (except in matters of the heart when utter irrationality drowns clarity), both driving me nuts with their opposing views. Sometimes there are more than two; sometimes there's a crowd all shouting for the stage of my voice. At these times I long for one Absolute Voice to evaporate all the others, a voice that is useful, truthful and unequivocally correct.

But does such an Absolute Voice exist? Can I tune in to it like a radio? Or am I destined to a lifetime of having to manage the opposing parties in my consciousness?

There's another feature of these internally opposing characters that is also noteworthy. The one that ends up speaking through me is usually the one that suits the context and can deliver the impression I want to create. The mood that I'm in on the day also plays a big part in the selection of who is going to get airtime. So much for 'the truth of me' when the reality is, I have choice. Choice immediately raises questions about values and intentions. These do not represent Absolute Truth; rather they represent social conditioning and personal preference.

With difficult questions and my own indecisive response to them, I have a fallback net, given to me by my Ngarinyin (Aboriginal) friends in the Kimberley. It is this. When in doubt, consult Nature, because everything that has ever been invented or can be invented, every problem, every issue experienced, every

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question that has or can be asked by humans has its equivalent in the natural world. In other words, the natural world holds all questions and all answers in exemplar or template form; we have only to observe mindfully to understand. That's not to say there are no contradictions in nature; rather, there are circumstances that encourage one solution to a question while other circumstances may require a different response. Let's take a look at an issue for which, due to the circumstances, there is a multiplicity of responses.

Two issues promise to dominate the ecological and political agenda of our nation for a long time to come. These are the extraction of oil within 50 kilometers of the pristine Ningaloo Reef in the sea lane for whale and shark migrations up and down the west coast; and water rights in the Murray Darling River system. Both of these issues pose very important questions about rights and responsibilities. The pro-circumstances revolve around society's need to secure regular supplies of basic natural resources in order to maintain the developed worlds lifestyles including the maintenance and expansion of business and investment, energy raw materials such as oil and water, and full employment. The anti-circumstances revolve around sustaining the health of the environment, including the rights of plants and animals to conduct their life cycles without interference and damaging stress. Some of the questions that arise include:

**Is there a hierarchy of rights for species' survival with humans at the top?** Some would say yes, in the context of the Old Testament discourse on Dominion (Genesis 1:26 – 31), and others would say no, based on a Gaia or ecological discourse (*Dialogue Australasia* Issue 24, Nov 2010 pp 8-9).

**Does the fact that human beings have the most evolved brain and mind of all species simultaneously confer unfettered predation**

**or exploitation rights over the rest of creation?** Some would say yes, because Man alone is crafted in God's image, so to develop mankind is to optimise God's intention in His creation of us. Others would say no, because humans cannot survive alone without creation, so by respecting the ecological relationship systems the whole of creation survives and thrives.

**Can lands and waters and therefore the flora and fauna that live in them, get sick and die through human activity?** The answer here is an absolute yes. Evidence of this abounds in scientific literature. Perhaps more important are the questions that this circumstance generates, like, **does it matter?** Is that just the price of progress? Is it a matter of them or us? Do I care about crying whales and elephants, or felled forests? Do other species have rights to life? Do lands and waters have intrinsic rights to health and well-being?

These are just a few ultimate questions that force us to examine our own minds in order to find answers that we can defend and live with. When I'm stuck in internal debate I look to Nature for assistance. The Ngarinyin (Kimberley Aboriginal language group) have taught me to do this. I look at white ant and bee colonies to help me understand social organisation and governance; trees 'dancing hip to hip' to understand cultural and social values, weeds in the garden to understand opportunism and globalisation, native forest clear-felling to understand the impact of the loss of social and cultural diversity, kangaroos on my block to understand the importance of belonging and identity. In each case I ask an ultimate question, is my (action, attitude, belief) correct? What does the evidence in Nature tell me?

One of the most surprising discoveries I've made is that morality and ethics do not seem to exist in the natural world. I wonder, are these notions cultural constructions? Are there any ultimate truths at all? Plants, animals, weather and earth systems all operate in

response to each other with seemingly one purpose; to ensure that the planet survives and thrives as a viable living organism in its own right. It can be argued that to achieve this end, the natural world self-corrects. If the earth is extremely thirsty after prolonged drought, it generates its own hydration. This may not suit all species, and there may be some significant casualties, but the natural systems correct the imbalance to restore efficient homeostasis. Nature doesn't worry about the rights and wrongs of the correction, or the casualties that result. If the population of any species becomes unsustainable, it culls itself down by other natural processes like controlled breeding or starvation. These examples raise big questions for human populations and their relationship with the environment that sustains them. It seems that we can either listen to or participate respectfully in Creation; or not, and endure the inevitable hardships of the planet's self-correcting mechanisms.

David Mowaljarlai (Ngarinyin elder) and I visited the big open cut gold mining pit in Kalgoorlie, WA. He gazed across the massive expanse of the hole in the earth, saw the giant ore trucks at the bottom of the pit as they loaded up and wended their way around and up the sides to tower over us when they reached the top.

What they digging all this for?

Gold.

What they do with gold?

Make jewellery.

Who that jewellery for?

Mostly for wealthy people all over the world.

You take all that earth for little bit of gold?

Afterwards I asked him what he thought about the mine and the gold. He shook his head in bewilderment and, I think, anger, and said he wasn't worried 'b'cause Wunggdud look after itself ... Wunggdud fix it up sometime.'

In his words I heard a number of reactions, including that the problem created in the destruction of the earth was too big for him to figure out, but that he trusted or 'knew' that it would eventually self-correct; that it was

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beyond his understanding why 'whitefellas' would change so much of the earth for so useless and small a return, and how they could possibly see this as a viable, sustainable activity that contributes to their own survival and thriving. Surely there are ethical and moral questions to be answered here – after all, we are the only species that can construct such abstract, intellectual concepts. Perhaps we have this capability in order to make correct choices.

Many of the issues discussed so far (including the jostling voices in my own head), engage adversarial positions reminiscent of a now famous statement, 'You're either with us or you're with them.' We live in a culture that seems to foster adversarial conflict resolution, including the institutions of law, politics and even religion. In law, a person is either guilty or not guilty; in politics we are labeled ideologically right or left, and in religion, it's Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim and so on. Because the process is usually adversarial as in a debate, an individual is often defined in terms of a more rigid ideology with associated absolute values, rather than as a person who can hold many positions within his or her own unique or distinctive value system. We see this in practice, and may even practice it ourselves. For example, when we see a very light-skinned Aboriginal person we may question whether he or she is really Aboriginal or white; a Muslim woman wearing a hijab attracts the comment that she's either an Australian or an Islamist. This 'black or white' dogma infuses morality, ethics, values and beliefs in just about every walk of life, and the noise in my own competing thoughts is unending. It begs the question, can there be an Absolute Truth, and if not, then what is the alternative?

I said earlier that when there is a tough question I look to Nature. In seeking to answer this question about Absolute Truth, I went for a walk around the base of some cliffs, sat on a dry rock and took in the pounding sea. Distracted from my ultimate question, I started to notice that once the wave hit, it ran up over the rocks to replenish the myriad of rock pools. As the tide retreated, these were left high and dry. On closer inspection into these pools I discovered so many life forms whose very existence depended on the tidal cycle of dry, wet, dry, wet. They could not survive if they were higher up the cliff on permanently dry land, and neither could they survive in

the deep ocean. They were creatures of the littoral zone, the inter-tidal of both land and sea – sometimes land, sometimes sea – but not actually, fully belonging to either. Their belonging place is wholly and discretely this littoral that has its own distinct character.



**Coastal Littoral**

The coastal littoral made me think of Aboriginal friends who, for various historical reasons, no longer live traditional, tribal lifestyles. Yet neither do they live traditional European or Settler lifestyles. Generally they are expected to live or learn to live fully in Western society, and to develop the necessary beliefs, values and competencies to do so. It's as if they must leave their culture and their spirits at the school gate to become anonymously quasi-whites. But it doesn't work. They can't un-be what and who they are and survive. Like the creatures in the coastal rock pools, the barnacles, star fish, limpets, hermit crabs, mussels, periwinkles, snails, or the turtles, frogs, ducks, snails and beetles of the freshwater lake littoral, my friends are of at least two cultural ancestries, histories and societies from which they draw different elements to survive and thrive. I now call this inter-cultural space, the 'cultural littoral'. Nature delivered a different, creative, fertile alternative to having to settle for black or white, this or that, right or left. After discussing the concept of a cultural littoral with academic Dr Tyson Yunkaporta, he quipped, "Maybe we should be teaching 'littoracy' as well as literacy!"

Although I have spent more than four decades living with and learning from Aboriginal people, I am constantly confounded at my own ignorance. Having happened quite recently upon this littoral revelation kindly offered up by Nature, I began to understand why Ngarinyin people call many, if not most animals, birds and reptiles of littoral zones, 'Chosen Animals'. Take the frog. Ngarinyin



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call it 'Banman Frog' which means that it intercedes between environments and dimensions. Mowaljarlai explained,

See that frog? 'E spits up in the air... makes a pipehole in the air... when those heavy clouds come over, those Wanjina clouds, 'e spits up at them. Lightning come shooting down through that pipehole, hit the ground, go under, travel everywhere then joining everything up.

I asked if the frog makes the lightning come down. 'Lightning go up before 'e come down!' he exclaimed. 'Banman Frog spits up, then lightning come down.' Here is an example of a littoral-living animal interceding, not just between water and land, not just between the heavens and the earth, but also relationally between man and environment. Similar stories are associated with all the Chosen Animals. Moreover, the science is impeccable!

Where else and what other situations, issues and conditions might include a littoral? Perhaps the idea can be applied to hijab-wearing Muslim Australians and differing political stances; perhaps the answer to the ultimate question about Absolute Truth is that Truth can never be a singularity. There are only littorals. All of us, all of creation, every situation, every event, every question inhabits a littoral of relationships between seemingly opposing forces, energies or elements.



Traditional Ngarinyin woman Jordpa, of the cultural littoral, walking to fishing spot in the pandanus palms with hand line and live frogs for bait in crocodile skin handbag, plastic water bottle, floral print frock, bare feet and tribal scarring.

Wait a minute. Opposing elements? What does 'oppose' imply? Is it the right word? Surely 'oppose' is a word in the adversarial lexicon? Does the sea oppose the land? Does Christianity oppose Islam? Do Aboriginal values and histories oppose Western values? Do males oppose females? Does death oppose life? Perhaps the word 'oppose' is so loaded with implied judgments and values that it encourages us to take a side or an adversarial position.

Earlier I described a discovery that Nature does not seem to have morality or ethics; it simply ensures the survival of the planet without regard for casualties. This is achieved by restoring relational balance in the relationship systems between elements, conditions, species, forces and energies. Mowaljarlai claimed, 'There are always two ...' This quote can be easily misunderstood to infer a discrete state of 'two-ness', whereas in Ngarinyin English it means much more. Mowaljarlai refers, not only to moiety, but also to, for example, sex and dynamic gender function, the activity of right and left brain, right and left handedness, balance in dynamic relations between and within the seen and unseen, the known and unknown and so on. It's meaning is fluid, dynamic and ultimately ineffable. In my book, *Men's Business, Women's Business* (Inner Traditions International 1998) I wrote,

To the memory of David Mowaljarlai, without whose friendship, inspiration and wisdom I might never have known that while I write with my right hand, my left hand gives me balance, support, and lift to dance a two-handed life.

The littoral of my handedness is the ineffable oneness that I experience when my hands draw on each other's different strengths and capabilities to allow me to feel whole. In other words, the littoral is not an interface of 'opposing' forces, but is a complexity of dynamic relationships that has its own whole identity and character.

To return to some of the initial big questions that were posed with adversarial alternatives and choices. What might our responses be if we were to consider them as littorals; to apply our 'littoracy' skills and awareness to their understanding and resolution?

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Does the fact that human beings have the



Author Hannah Rachel Bell and Ngarinyin law woman, Jordpa sharing cultural and ecological littoral experience.

most evolved brain and mind of all species simultaneously confer unfettered predation or exploitation rights over the rest of creation?

Can lands and waters and therefore the flora and fauna that live in them, get sick and die through human activity?

What are the implications of applied littoracy to the issues of Ningaloo Reef and the Murray-Darling River system; how might we address these issues if we regard them as littorals rather than the focus of opposing interested?

This discussion has touched on ethics, morality, responsibility, wants as opposed to survival needs, the rights of animals, plants, lands and waters, and the earth itself. It challenges the Old Testament discourse of human 'dominion over all the world' that results in a pecking order in which one species alone claims the right to destroy all others for its own ends. It also points to at least the unequivocal, enduring template of Nature, or what Mowaljarlai calls Wunggud, to guide us in our deliberations of Ultimate Questions. Finally, it introduces the new concept of 'littoracy' that offers the more complicated choice of acknowledging spaces between positions. Life in the littoral of ourselves is no less demanding, but at least it allows us to live comfortably in an inner space where different voices and positions can all contribute to the fabric of being wholly me.

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