Taking Notice[1]

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ABSTRACT

Resting on the belief that knowledge unfolds through dialogue this paper takes a dialogical approach to the exploration of worldviews. Understanding a worldview as a process of becoming rather than being, the paper engages with the thought of the Aboriginal teacher Jessie Wirrpa in relation to the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In particular, the paper explores ideas of knowledge, caring and 'attentive intersubjectivity'.

When Jessie Wirrpa took me walkabout she called out to her ancestors. She told them who we were and what we were doing, and she told them to help us. 'Give us fish', she would call out, 'the children are hungry'. When she was walking through country she was always with a group, and that group included the dead as well as the living. As her brother Allan Young said:

> At night, camping out, we talk and those [dead] people listen ... When we're walking, we're together. We got dead body there behind to help... Even if you're far away in a different country, you still call out to mother and father, and they can help you for dangerous place. And for tucker they can help you. (see Rose 1992: 73)

Every place we visited was part of some story or other. Here the owlet nightjar (Jessie's and Allan's 'totem') burnt his whiskers, there he flew away. Here the mullet jumped, and over there the flying foxes chucked their spears. Jessie spoke to the Dreamings too, calling out to them to let them know that the people who were there belonged there, that strangers were accompanied, that this was all lawful.

As we walked we took notice of other living things. When the cockatoos squawked and flew away, Jessie laughed because they were making a fuss about nothing. When the green flies bit us, we knew the crocs were laying their eggs, and Jessie began to think about going walkabout to those places. When the *jangarla* tree (*Sesbania formosa*) started to flower, we knew, or Jessie knew, that the barramundi would be biting. The world was always talking about itself, and

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Jessie was a skilled listener and observer. She knew how to interpret tracks, too. She knew who made what track, and she knew when and why those tracks were made, and where the animal was likely to be now. With a few hand signs she would organise the kids to circle a group of conkerberry bushes, and tell the young women to flush out, stun, and kill the goanna.

Jessie went to places she had been to before, and if, rarely, she hadn't been to a place, she made sure she was with somebody who had. And everywhere she went she encountered signs of former activities. Here a discarded stone spear point, there some charred sticks from a camp fire. No distinction between history and pre-history for Jessie: in her country the past rolled into the present on waves of generations who all belonged there. As she walked she told the stories: here the owlet nightjar burnt his whiskers and flew away, there we saw the goanna track; here he jumped out, and over there Margaret hit him. Debbie didn't know what to do, and we all had a good laugh. Here we cooked him. Good dinner camp, that one. Jessie's pedagogy required one to pay close attention. When I hollered for help and she showed me what to do she would always say: 'I'll show you once, after that you do it yourself.'

I know that Jessie's country gave her life; I walked with her, and it gave me life too. It nourished her, and she took care of it. She was a presence in her country, and her country knew her, and fed her and her group, held the signs of their lives and stories, and continued to bring forth life. Tagging along behind her, I did my best to learn.

I came to Yarralin, in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory of Australia to carry out research for a Ph.D. in anthropology in 1980. The questions I brought with me from America were philosophical in the main. I wanted to learn something about the meaning of life and death from the viewpoint of some Australian Aboriginal people. Those questions went onto the back burner while I threw myself into participant observation. I had a lot to learn about how to make a fire, how to catch a fish, how to understand North Australian Kriol and other languages. Of course, I had to learn who people were, and this meant learning about their connections – to other people, other plants and animals, to countries, and to Law. That meant learning the terms for all the species, and learning place names, Dreaming tracks, places of danger. I followed behind Jessie as I learned how to behave properly in the face of all these people, animals, plants, and places. By the time I returned to my research questions I was in a different world – a living world made up of countries. I had come to understand country as a geographical area and as a system of nourishing life, a place within which responsibilities and reciprocities are recursive, and in which living things take care of their own (Rose 1992, 1996).

For Jessie and other people in the Victoria River District, life is an ever emergent becoming, embodied in the ephemeral beings whose work is to keep life happening. The sacred is actualised through the everyday work of the world, and out of Dreaming creation life continues to happen for as long as ephemeral

beings do the work of the world. Dreamings constitute the enduring sources which continue to pour forth the life of the country, including its people. In the everyday, as in ritual, life is lived on the 'threshold of unfolding events' (Scott 1996: 73); life happens because sentient beings remain in communication with each other. The life of the world is continuously coming into being, and the happening life of the world carries on from generation to generation because living things are connected with and amongst each other, and because they take care of each other.

Jessie's country is full of sentience – animals, many plants, Dreamings, the ancestors, and other things like hills or stones take notice, as people say. Jessie took notice too, and she knew that all these other beings were taking notice of her. Her footprints, her fires, her songs and stories, her visits and her calling to the country are all communicative acts. They work within the broader communicative system of country, and they intend to be noticed.

Jessie took care of her country and her country took care of her (see Rose 1996). Country was the ground of her being; she was a walking and ephemeral nexus of country, Dreamings, and care. Nothing stood alone in Jessie's country; everything was happening because of the care of others. Communication is the evidence and much of the substance of relationships, so it follows that one of the deepest desires of all life is to be attended to, and one of the deepest practices of participation in living systems is to pay attention. An Aboriginal ethic of ecological engagement requires that subjects, human and non-human, attend to each other.

Aboriginal ethics of care and connection resonate with the interest of postmodernism in the 'premodern' (Kepnes 1996: 1), but I do not want to suggest that Jessie Wirrpa somehow escaped the lash of modernity. It descended upon her in the form of conquest, and it killed most of her people. Under the name of progress, modern people have bulldozed sacred trees, and dynamited sacred stones. Modern people enslaved Jessie for much of her life (see Rose 1991), and eradicated some of the species with which she and her family were intimately connected and on which they depended, contemporary politicians continue to [illegible] one can, in principle, master all things by calculation (discussed in Rubenstein 1992: 146). Rubenstein (1992) takes the argument back to the beginnings of monotheism, grounding disenchantment in the emergence of a belief system founded on singularity and exclusion. Levinas also takes a long view (Iona to Jena and beyond), contending that 'philosophy has ignored – or, better, has not

heard – a cry that has its origin outside of the insular totality of self's world' (Oppenheim 1997: 13). The idealism of philosophy, along with the monotheistic vision of singularity and exclusion, forms one of the histories of the west: a history of the de-realisation of the world. Whether one looks to a short or long durée, we seem clearly to be following a trajectory along which our connections with the world outside of self are less and less evident to us, and more and more difficult to sustain and to experience as real.

Paradoxically, the quest for knowledge has forced us to close off our senses ever more rigorously, as the modern theory of knowledge relies on treating others as objects in order to dissect, control and dominate them (Kepnes 1996: 1). In a purely instrumental sense, one can readily grasp the logic. Disconnection and de-realisation mark out a ground in which modernity, founded first and last in violence, and oriented toward fragmentation and disruption (in its theory and practice of knowledge as well as its theory and practice of production), produces an ontological gap between subject and 'object'. Modern people, like the philosophers Levinas discusses, are brought into a philosophy of power (Oppenheim 1997: 15) and become adept at not hearing.

The philosophical questions I investigated in the Victoria River District resonate with a form of postmodern philosophy exemplified in the work of Buber and Levinas. Indeed, Levinas (1996: 19) asserts that western philosophy has come to an end: 'the history of the theory of knowledge in contemporary philosophy is the history of the disappearance of the subject/object problem'. Levinas teaches an ethic of human connectivity: 'consciousness and even subjectivity follow from, are legitimated by, the ethical summons which proceeds from the intersubjective encounter. Subjectivity arrives, so to speak, in the form of a responsibility toward an other...' (Newton 1995: 12). In his brilliant search for subjectivity in alterity, Levinas, along with others, emphasises language and the interhuman domain. In doing so, however, he and others bypass the domains of communication that are experienced by an attending subject such as Jessie, who takes notice of what the whole of her country is saying, and whose life unfolds within a structured web of connections and responsibilities (see Rose nd for more analysis).

Jessie Wirrpa lived an ethic of intersubjective attention in a sentient world where life happens because living things take notice. I learned by walking with her that this ethic is not human-centred. Care of one's country, one's people, one's Dreaming sites, and one's non-human countrymen are not governed by different ethics; they are actions through which people bring forth, and are themselves brought forth by, interacting subjectivities. Mutual care is neither infinitely obligatory, nor is it diffuse and undifferentiated. The structure of mutual care is local and bounded; Dreaming tracks cross-cut and overlap each other, countries are replicated, and care is recursive (Rose nd).

Jessie took notice, and I never knew her to hear silence. Her attending presence was, to her knowledge, always reciprocated. Her voice and action,

footprints and other traces, communicated to others. She never thought there was nobody out there. Sometimes I tagged along, sometimes we went hand in hand. Her history was laid out on the earth around her, as well as being carried in her head and proved in her actions. I dragged mine along with me in my head as a history of vastly diminished attention. And I saw all around me the roads, fences and 'no trespassing' signs, the erosion, the scald areas, wash-aways and caved in river banks that told of modernity in action. I have met and worked with many people who are concerned about what is happening to their place, but I know of nobody who takes care of it with the holistic passion that senior Aboriginal people like Jessie bring to their lifelong practices of care.

In the western world the twentieth century has been a period of profound rupture that has brought our thinking to a dead end (Wyschogrod 1996: 303), and made banal our manifold insensitivities (Arendt 1994). Two or more millennia of de-realisation, and in the modern world the rapid expansion of a warrior culture of conquest that demands of people a highly intensified pitilessness (Kittredge 1996), have pretty well knocked us out of our senses, philosophically speaking. I see an index to our sensory deprivation in the writings of one of our great ecology essayists. Annie Dillard has listened to the world intently:

> The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. (Dillard 1988: 76)

No one who had walked in the bush with Jessie Wirrpa could believe this, and I wonder how Annie Dillard, who pays such close attention, could believe it. Is it a poetic statement that is more metaphorical than descriptive? I think not. Dillard, like Rubenstein (1992), takes the desacralisation of the world back to monotheism. She tracks the loss of the voice of God in the world:

> It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind use to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of the earth, and the living things say very little to very few. Birds may crank out sweet gibberish, monkeys howl...But so do cobbles rumble when a wave recedes, and thunders break the air in lightning storms. I call these noises silence. (Dillard 1988: 70)

We humans took away the meaning, she seems to be saying. And later in this essay she makes it clear that this is a feasible proposition because in her view we humans are the only meaning givers/receivers amongst the species of the earth:

> ...our meaningful activity scarcely covers the terrain. We do not use the songbirds, for instance.... We can only witness them – whoever they are. If we were not here, they would be songbirds falling in the forest. If we were not here, material events like the passage of seasons would lack even the meager meanings we are able to muster for them. The show would play to an empty house... (ibid.: 72-3)

It requires an enormously human-centred world view to think of the living world as a 'show' that 'would play to an empty house'. Dillard's allusion to songbirds references that old philosophical saw: if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If I were sitting on the ground with Jessie, and paying attention, I would know that the question actually contains its own answer. It is very simple: to presuppose a forest is to presuppose an attentive subjectivity. If the tree falls in the forest, then the forest hears. But I can imagine Jessie wanting to know about the people who heard nothing. Who was responsible for the forest, and did the tree fall or was it cut down? Were the people who were responsible for the forest letting trees be cut down wantonly, and if so, what was wrong with them? Or, if nobody was responsible, who should take over responsibility? In short, she would see questions about sociality, relationship, and responsibility. Why was nobody taking notice?

Under what conditions might we imagine that a tree would fall and the sound would not be heard? One condition is the Dillard scenario: that the human species is the only attentive, meaning-making species on the planet, and that nobody was listening. Another condition is this: if the tree were the only living thing left on the whole of the planet. Such a scenario is impossible ecologically, but the metaphorical dimensions claim my attention. This is where we stand today with respect to many species we know of, and many more of which we know nothing. We know that life is being eradicated wantonly and recklessly, and that the species that could be doing something about that simply stands there hearing silence. Or, if the cry is heard, those who hear are unable to respond.

The late modern existential condition is pervaded and defined by powerlessness, as well as by silence and a sense of absence. It has been eloquently explored by Dillard and many others, but such explorations are not the final word. For life, and for the world, the postmodern endeavour to overthrow the pillars of western intellectual/philosophical traditions requires the subversion of human-centrism. A philosophy that remains human-centred will remain stuck in that monologic space where the voices of the world go unheard.

Life with Jessie taught me this: country is not a show. This world is for life, and it is real. It is real in its own being, in its own connectedness, and in its own will to live. We are connected in this world because we are part of it, whether we know it or not. Other living things attend to each other, and the world goes on singing even in the vicinity of those who hear only silence. Jessie knew how to bring big questions down to earth and situate them in responsibility: take notice, she always said, and take care. It's up to you.

NOTE

This paper is dedicated to my beloved friend and teacher Jessie Wirrpa, dec. 1995.

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