Acta Academica Supplementum 2005(2): 159-181

Tony Balcomb

Rediscovering engagement after Descartes — phenomenology, Macmurray, and the primal world-view

Philosophy in the tradition of Kant and Descartes is characterised by disengagement and objectification. But the rationalist world-view of Descartes and Newton has been challenged from within by the focus on engagement and personification in the work of philosophers such as Macmurray and those in the phenomenological tradition such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. This challenge may be indicative of a paradigm shift within modernity. In a manner reminiscent of an African world-view, Macmurray attempts to reinstate relationism, while the phenomenologists propose a similar emphasis on immediate, sensuous appreciation of, and engagement with, the environment. The African world-view is distinctly similar to those proposed by Macmurray and the phenomenologists.

Die herontdekking van betrokkenheid na Descartes — fenomenologie, Macmurray en die primordiale wêreldbeskouing

Filosofie in die tradisie van Kant en Descartes word gekenmerk deur onbetrokkenheid en objektivering. Tog is die rasionalistiese wêreldbeeld van Descartes en Newton van binne af bevraagteken deur 'n fokus op betrokkenheid en personifikasie in die werk van filosowe soos Macmurray en figure uit die fenomenologiese tradisie soos Husserl en Merleau-Ponty. Hierdie uitdaging mag tekenend wees van 'n paradigmaskuif binne die modernisme. Op 'n wyse wat herinner aan 'n Afrika-wêreldbeeld probeer Macmurray 'n relasiebenadering in ere herstel terwyl die fenomenoloë 'n soortgelyke klem plaas op die onmiddellike sintuiglike waardering van en betrokkenheid by die omgewing. Die Afrika-wêreldbeeld is aantoonbaar soortgelyk aan dit wat deur Mcmurray en die fenomenoloë voorgestel word.

Dr A Balcomb, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, Private Bag X01, Scottsville 3209. E-mail: BalcombT@ukzn.ac.za

In his introduction to the 1994 publication of Descartes' *A discourse on method – meditations and principles*, Tom Sorel writes the following:

> Descartes broke his journey in Germany in the winter of 1619, and in a house near Ulm he gave himself over completely to reflection on methodological questions. His near-obsessive meditations seem to have led, on 10 November 1619, to his experiencing a day-time vision, and that night three dreams, which revealed to him, as he thought, his task in life: to unfold a wonderful science (Sorel 1994: xix).

The "revelation" that Descartes had over that fateful forty-eight hours was, of course, his now famous and epoch-making *cogito ergo sum*. What has become completely lost in the excitement around what was revealed to him is how it was revealed to him, the significance of which is possibly as great as the revelation itself. If we are to believe this account then we must accept the fact that Descartes came to his revelation neither by thinking nor by doubting but by dreams and visions. Indeed any shaman or *isangoma* would have known exactly what he was talking about if he told them how it was that he came to his revelation, even though they might not have known what he was talking about when he told them what the revelation was. We have here, indeed, potentially one of the greatest paradoxes in the history of philosophical thought. Descartes, the father of "modern" doubt, receives a "revelation" in the context of a "pre-modern" world-view — a world-view that took as axiomatic the reality of God, angels, demons and spirits — but subsequently, due to the revelation, his world-view came to exclude, at least in theory, the possibility of all these things. This is a matter of history.

There were, of course, many other players, thinkers, and actors in the transition from the pre-modern to the modern world. Indeed it can be argued that the seeds of modernity were sown many centuries before this. However, since Descartes seems to have so succinctly summed up the essence of "modern" epistemology, and since he lived in a world that was so essentially "pre-modern", he is the one who seems always to be quoted on modern rationality. This paper will attempt to grasp the essential meaning of a way of thinking that has become associated with modernity (though it existed a long time before this) and to compare it to an alternative way of thinking that has become associated with

a pre-modern or "primal" way of thinking,[1] and in the process to discern some of what has been lost and found in the "development" of philosophical epistemology. That modernity has lost some of its attraction is obvious, otherwise we would not have invented the notion of post-modernity. This too must be taken into account. More important, however, is the fact that much of the world's present population, although profoundly affected by modernity on every level, has not accepted it epistemologically, but still apprehends the universe in a pre-modern way. Obviously, therefore, we ignore this way of apprehending reality at our peril, especially if we live in Africa. Instead, we should be asking ourselves what we mean by a "pre-modern" world-view and what we can learn from it, whether there is any precedent for it in other branches of European philosophy, and whether there is any place for it in a post-modern world.

1. Understanding the modern and the pre-modern

How, first of all, are we to understand the modern condition? Robert Pippin (1990: 22) states:

> Modernity promised us a culture of unintimidated, curious, rational, self-reliant individuals, and it has produced [...] a herd society, a race of anxious, timid, conformist 'sheep', and a culture of utter banality.

Paradoxically, however, it has also given us a degree of control over our environment, mastery of nature, and self-determination unprecedented in human history, and achieved in an extremely short time. According to Charles Taylor (1989: 155), the essence of modernity is disengagement. When Descartes articulated his *cogito* he was consciously expressing what was probably the most fundamental of disengagements — that of mind from body. However, it was not the only one. With it came disengagement of time from space, the individual from society, the spiritual from the material, and the personal from the cosmic. Gunton (1993: 14) describes disengagement as "standing apart from the world and treating the other as external, as mere object". The key word, he says,

1 As argued by J V Taylor in his book *The primal vision: Christian presence within African religion* (2001), the word "primal" should not be associated with "primitive" but with that which existed first, or before the "modern".

is "instrumental". "We use the other as an instrument, as the mere means of realizing our will, and not in some way integral to our being" (Gunton 1993: 14). This disengagement from reality has led to the objectification of reality which has resulted, at least apparently, in the control of reality. This disengagement, according to Gunton, began not with Descartes, but with Socrates, the mentor of Aristotle, who played mentor to a whole line of philosophers and thinkers, culminating in probably the most significant of them all — Isaac Newton. Within this philosophical trajectory the universe is objectified, inanimate; God is the Unmoved Mover; time is abstract; space is empty; physical laws are absolute; reason is supreme; reality is measurable. Plato, also a student of Socrates, was the first to show us, according to Gunton (1993: 15), that

> [...] pure philosophical or metaphysical speculation, a demythologizing of the gods in the name of pure rationality, is the beginning of disengagement.
>
> Underlying the anthropomorphism of the Greek gods, however irrational and morally unacceptable, there lay a quite proper concern for a universe which made some sense of the human moral condition. [...] The Presocratics and their sceptical successors, in losing the anthropomorphic, also lost the personal. Ethos was lost to environment, and so person and world were torn apart. It is similar to what in our day is called scientism, which limits all claims of knowledge to the narrowly scientific, and thus abstracts knowledge to things from the human context in which that knowledge is shaped. Giving attention to the environment in abstraction from its inhabitants leads to a world empty of personal meaning.

If the modern condition is characterised by disengagements the premodern condition is characterised by engagement. For the purposes of this essay I shall equate pre-modernity with what has been called the primal world-view, by which is meant the world-view anterior to, or preceding, the modern world-view.

One of the most graphic descriptions of unity between subject and object in the primal world-view is given by J V Taylor. He describes an experience he had on Lake Victoria where he assisted some fishermen to bring in their nets. As the fishermen drew in the two ends of the net to enclose the fish, and themselves, within it, the net became a metaphor for the primal universe, which Taylor calls the "unbroken circle". He felt "the edges of separateness evaporating" as he experienced the oneness of this universe in the oneness of all things in and around

him. His graphic account of this experience ends with the following description of what he calls the "primal vision":

> Not only is there less separation between subject and object, between self and not-self, but fundamentally all things share the same nature and the same interaction one upon another — rocks and forest trees, beasts and serpents, the power of the wind and waves upon a ship, the power of a drum over a dancer's body, the power in the mysterious caves of Kokola, the living, the dead and the first ancestors, from the stone to the divinities an hierarchy of power but not of being, for all are one, all are here, all are now (Taylor 1975: 64).

Every scholar of primal thought, from Levy-Bruhl in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to Placide Tempels in the mid-twentieth century to Alexis Kagame, to V Y Mudimbe, and John Mbiti in the late twentieth century has commented on the oneness of the universe in primal thinking that Taylor so graphically describes. The first person to recognise this phenomenon as the distinctive feature that differentiated Western and primal thought was Levy-Bruhl. He saw the essence of this way of thinking as a mystical orientation in which "objects" are fused with an intangible power, meaning that "the object is both itself and a spirit; the spirit both itself and an object" (Horton 1993: 65). This led to what he called "participation", a term that has developed into the celebrated concept of "vital participation" which has been widely described by both African and European scholars of primal thought.

Placide Tempels was the first to articulate the African world-view in terms of a philosophical system. His *Bantu Philsophy* (1959) has become a point of departure for discussion among many African philosophers since then, especially in Francophone Africa. "[The] concept of separate beings", he says, "which find themselves side by side, entirely independent one of another, is foreign to Bantu thought":

> {The} Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one of another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature and Creator. For the Bantu there is interaction of being with being, that is to say, of force with force. Transcending the mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions, they see a relationship of forces which we should call ontological (Tempels 1959: 58).

Most African philosophers (one exception being Kagame) have taken issue with Tempels's identification of "being" with "force" but few have denied his assertion that African ontology valorises the inter-connectedness

of all being. The most articulate of these philosophers has been Alexis Kagame, who set out consciously to test Tempels's theories by means of linguistic analysis. In his monumental *La philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'Être* (1956) he analyses the term *ntu*, roughly translated as "being". Mudimbe's (1985: 189) summarises Kagame's conclusion as follows:

> ... that the Bantu equivalent of "to be" is strictly and only performed as a copula. It does not express the notion of existence, *and therefore cannot translate the Cartesian "cogito"* (my emphasis and inverted commas, TB).

That the Bantu word for "being" can only be performed as a copula, and that within this schema the Cartesian *cogito* cannot be translated, is probably the most radical way of stating that the essence of African ontology, usually adumbrated in the expression "I am because others are, and because others are I am", is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian schema.

Mudimbe's summary of Kagame's analysis of *ntu* is a fine expression of African ontology:

> In sum, the *ntu* is somehow a sign of a universal similitude. Its presence in beings brings them to life and attests to both their individual value and [...] the measure of their integration in the dialectic of vital energy. *Ntu* is both a uniting and a differentiating vital norm which explains the powers of vital inequality in terms of difference between beings. It is a sign that God, father of all beings [...] has put a stamp on the universe, thus making it transparent in a hierarchy of sympathy. Upwards one would read the vitality which, from minerals through vegetables, animals and humans, links stones to the departed and God himself. Downwards, it is a genealogical filiation of forms of beings, engendering or relating to one another, all of them witnessing to the original source that made them possible (Mudimbe 1985: 189, 190).

African ontology, epistemology and cosmology could be described as relational, interconnected, and theistic. Similarities to this way of apprehending reality can be found in the Western philosophical tradition, specifically in the work of John Macmurray and among the phenomenological school.

2. Macmurray and relationism

In *The self as agent*, the published version of his Gifford lectures given in 1953, Macmurray systematically dismantles the Cartesian and Kantian schema. The West is facing, he says, a "crisis of the personal":

> Modern philosophy is characteristically egocentric. I mean no more than this: that firstly, it takes the Self as its starting point, and not God, or the world or the community; and that, secondly, the Self is an individual in isolation, an ego or 'I', never a 'thou'. This is shown by the fact that there can arise the question, 'How does the Self know that other selves exist?' Further, the Self so premised is a thinker in search of knowledge. It is conceived as the Subject; the correlate in experience of the object presented for cognition (Macmurray 1953: 31)

The self, says Macmurray, should not be conceived of theoretically, as a subject but practically, as an agent. Human behaviour, he says, is comprehensible only in terms of dynamic social reference. In other words the idea of the isolated, purely individual self is a fiction. Instead of making primary the notion of thinking, which causes nothing to happen, Macmurray makes action primary. It is thus a matter of "I do, therefore I am". This makes the self both a subject and an agent. The correlate of the Self is the Other. The Other is not an individual but the world:

> We may then say that, since the world is the correlate of the Self, the world in which the Self, as agent, acts, is the same world which as subject, it knows (Macmurray 1953: 90).
>
> This implies that the Self is part of the world in which it acts, and in dynamic relation with the rest of the world. On the other hand, as subject the Self stands 'over against' the world, which is its object. The Self as subject then is not part of the world it knows, but withdrawn from it, and so, in conception, outside it, or other than its object. But to be part of the world is to exist, while to be excluded from the world is to be non-existent. It follows that the self exists as agent but not as subject. […] As an agent I am a body, operative, material and existent; as a subject I am a mind, causally ineffective, immaterial and non-existent (Macmurray 1953: 91-2).

Having established, first, the fact that the Self is primarily an acting and not simply a thinking being, and second, that the Self does not exist as subject "over against" the world but as an agent in relation to the world, Macmurray then addresses the issue of how it is that the world is apprehended by the Self. He agrees with Kant's revolutionary

hypothesis that instead of asking how it is that we understand the world, we should be asking how it is that the world comes to be understood by us. However, in Kant's two-world hypothesis Macmurray detects once again the Cartesian dualism that he detests. Kant believed that there is a phenomenal world — that is, the world as it appears to us — and the world as it is in itself, or the noumenal world. The former is accessible through "practical reason" and the latter through "pure reason". But pure reason is pure indeed in the sense that it remains in the realm of the theoretical and not the practical. So Kant acknowledges the theoretical existence of a world that we can speculate about but denies that we can know anything about it in terms of practical experience. In other words, we cannot experience the world as it is; we can only experience it as it appears to us. And it must appear to us in terms that we ourselves rationally determine. This means that if there is anything in the world that may come to us in a way that we ourselves cannot determine rationally, it remains outside the bounds of possible apprehension, even though it might exist. This excludes all possibility of religious or related experience, which he rejects.

The world comes to us through our senses. But, Macmurray (1953: 105) asserts, the sense that has predominated our apprehension of it has been that of sight:

> Philosophical theories of perception [...] tend to be theories of visual perceptions. They assume the primacy of vision: that is to say, they take vision as the model of all sensory experience, and proceed as though it were certain that a true theory of visual perception will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to all other modes of sense-perception.

This has had an enormous impact on philosophy in general. From the time of Plato, vision has formed the basis on which all knowledge has been construed. The basis of science, for example, is "observation". But this assumes that the Self, once again, is the subject, standing "over against" the object that it sees. Such an experience must be purely subjective, or mental, and makes no difference to the relation between subject and object. This presumes a gap between knowing and acting — a conceptual dualism. "How is it", Macmurray asks, "that through sense-perception I am aware of the Other?" Not the Object, which is the correlative of the Subject, but the Other, which is the correlative of the Self. The Other, in this context, may be another thing or another organism

or another person. How, asks Macmurray, do we come to awareness of existences other than ourselves? His answer is found in shifting the emphasis from visual to tactile perception. Tactile perception by definition involves action, in contrast to visual perception which, by definition, is passive. To touch anything is to exert pressure upon it and thereby to modify it, however slightly. Visual perception excludes any operation upon its object. It is possible to exist, as many do, without sight, but it is not possible even to imagine existence without touch. Establishing the existence of the Other tactilely means to do so by experiencing resistance. It is in the resistance that we apprehend the Other-than-ourself. It is the Other that resists our will, that appears as the negation of the Self, as that which limits its existence, moves against us in the negative direction:

> The Self and Other are correlatives discriminated together by their opposition, and this opposition constitutes the unity of experience [...] The Self does not first know itself and determine an objective; and then discover the other in carrying out its intention. The distinction of Self and Other is the awareness of both; and the existence of both is the fact that their opposition is a practical, and not a theoretical opposition (Macmurray 1953: 115).

To act at all is to act upon something and to receive an action in return. This reciprocity of action is the beginning of the notion of the consciousness of the Other. Our knowledge of the Other, whatever the Other may be — organism, person, or material body — is of the same kind, although "in practice we understand any form of behaviour better the closer it is to our own". For Macmurray all knowledge is necessarily anthropomorphic, because "we can only determine the behaviour of the Other through knowledge of our own":

> I can understand the Other only by imputing to it a determination of the Self. The Other is given as a resistance to my action; I must therefore characterise the Other as an agent like myself, acting against me. In general, then, the rule for the determination of the activity of the Other is this: *I must attribute to the Other, if I am to understand it, the form of activity that I attribute to myself. My understanding of the behaviour of the Other is always mediated through my understanding of my own*. For I have an immediate awareness of my own states and activities and their modifications which I do not have of those of the Other (Macmurray 1953: 117, my emphasis).

Here is the crux of Macmurray's argument and the reason why I have quoted him at length in this piece. His argument is inevitably leading him to the assertion that all human knowledge is anthropomorphic in the sense that "whatever characteristics we attribute to the Other must be included within the full characterisation of ourselves" (Macmurray 1953: 117).

Macmurray's argument and the basis of his alternative philosophy can be summarised thus:

- The dualism that characterises the philosophy influenced by Descartes and Kant, which is the dominant Western paradigm, is false, because a) it posits the Self as existing in isolation from other selves; b) by making the Self the subject and everything else objects it fails to account for the full experience of reality; c) it remains in the realm of the theoretical and fails to take account of the practical; d) it valorises thought over action, but thought cannot of itself cause anything to happen therefore it reinforces passivity; e) it makes existence in the world a matter of thought and not action; f) it discounts the possibility of knowing anything other than what rationality allows.
- The failure of dualism means that an alternative paradigm has to be established. This paradigm needs to a) shift the mode of being in the world from the subject/object correlate to the Self/Other correlate; b) make doing and not thinking central; c) afford the greatest possibility of knowing and experiencing, the world in all its existences — whether phenomenal or noumenal — being conscious of the whole world in the fullest possible way.
- This paradigm shift will involve a shift in perception from emphasis on the visual to emphasis on the tactile. This is because the visual by definition reinforces the subject/object correlate as well as passivity. The tactile, on the other hand, affords a mode of consciousness based on the Self/Other correlate by forcing the Self to experience a resistance that alters the nature of being of both the Self and the Other.
- Having established that the Self responding to the Other is a better mode of existence in the world than the subject "over against" the object, and that doing is a better way of being in the world than thinking, and that the tactile is a better way of apprehending the

world than the visual, the next step is to describe the world in relation to the self, in terms of the self — that is, anthropomorphically.

Much of Macmurray's thinking seems to be influenced by the phenomenologist school of philosophy, especially Heidegger, who is the philosopher of being *par excellence*. Macmurray's emphasis on the tactile resonates with Heidegger's critique of Descartes' inability to understand the true being of being. Descartes himself suggested that the physical resistance of an object is indicative of its immovable occupation of a specific place relative to another thing changing its place. "But when the experience of hardness is interpreted in this way," says Heidegger (1996: 90), "the kind of being that belongs to sensory perception is obliterated, and with it the possibility of encountering the being of those beings encountered in such perception". Heidegger here implies what Macmurray has made explicit — that is, that to understand the true nature of being one has to move away from the perception of it as simply matter. The phenomenologists, in fact, open the way for a far more sympathetic understanding of the primal world-view and it is to them that we must now turn to seek resonances between this branch of Western philosophy and those ways of thinking that espouse engagement as a true means of apprehending reality.

3. The phenomenologists and engagement

In a remarkable book entitled *The spell of the sensuous*, David Abram attempts to locate primal thought within the phenomenologist tradition and demonstrates how close the thinking of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger is to the experience of pre-modern cultures. Starting with Husserl he shows how phenomenology takes us back to the subjective world of experience as the point of departure for all investigation, scientific or otherwise. To emphasise experience is to recognise the centrality of the body, one's own as well as those of others, as the means of awareness of phenomena. The embodied subject, as an experiencing being, comes to recognise other bodies who are also experiencing subjects and with whom an associated empathy needs to be established. The phenomenal world is not "the isolate haunt of a solitary ego, but a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself" (Abram 1996: 37). Husserl's contribution to the modern scientific project was to point out that rather

than objectivity, in the sense of disengagement, being a goal that should be striven for, greater emphasis should be placed on the intersubjectivity of experience:

> The 'real world' in which we find ourselves, [...] the very world that our sciences are trying to fathom — is not a sheer 'object', not a fixed and finished 'datum' from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles. The mutual inscription of others in my experience, and (as I must assume) of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or 'reality' (Abram 1996: 39).

Husserl called this intersubjective world of corporately experienced reality the "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*):

> The life-world is the world of our immediately lived experience as we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it [...] reality as it engages us before being analysed by our theories and our science (Abram 1996: 40).

It is the indeterminate realm from which all our concepts and representations "draw nourishment". The assumption of objectivity in the modern era causes an almost total eclipse of this life-world, alienating human society and civilisation from the sensuous world of ordinary engagements. The life-world is obviously culturally specific as each culture shapes the way that people experience and engage the world differently. Yet, Husserl argued, underneath the various layers that constitute the life-world there is a deeply primordial, unifying way of engaging reality focused around the space of the very earth that we occupy. Space, for modern physics, is "mathematically infinite and homogenous" and earth is a celestial body within this void. However, "phenomenologically considered, all bodies (including our own) are first located relative to the ground of the earth", which does not so much exist in space as provide space in which we may live and move and have our being. Although the Copernican theory has it that the sun is the centre of the universe and the earth rotates around it, this is not our everyday, sensory experience — as is borne out by the very language we use — the sun "rises" and "sets". The earth, called by Husserl the "original" ark, does not move. Descartes's philosophical disjunction of mind and body reinforces the Copernican theory and

stresses the necessity for disbelief in what the senses tell us. The phenomenological consequence of this is to reinforce disengagement from the earth.

Merleau-Ponty took Husserl's thinking further by radicalising it and emphasising the role of the body in the experiencing self. Husserl continued to hold to the concept of the self as a transcendental ego ultimately separable from phenomena. Merleau-Ponty rejected this and identified the subject, the experiencing self, with the bodily organism. The move is a radical one. In making the body the very subject of awareness one demolishes any hope that philosophy can provide a complete picture of reality, since such an account would require a mind or consciousness to stand outside of existence. Yet by making this move Merleau-Ponty paved the way for

> ... a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from the outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand (Abram 1996: 47).

This move inevitably had its own consequences. No longer could it be assumed that humankind has a "rational soul" or intellect that distinguishes it from other bodily forms of life and disconnects it from more corruptible spheres of existence, connecting it hierarchically through the so-called "great chain of being" with the divine "unmoved mover" himself. The limited, corporeal human being formed part of the limited, corporeal universe and needed to learn to live in harmony with it rather than in dominion over it. Making the body the locus of awareness meant reconfiguring the creativity and free-ranging mobility of the intellect around the body's immediate level of sensory perception. "The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active, open form, continually improvising its relation to things and to the world", which itself is constantly changing. The reciprocity, or interchange between a body and the entities surrounding it, between the self and the world through the senses of the body, entails the recognition of the essential animateness of the perceptual world. Perceived things are entities, sensible qualities are powers, the sensible itself is a field of animate presences. In this way the active involvement of the perceived world is underscored in perceiving experiences. Conversely:

> To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our sense; we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being. By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies (Abram 1996: 56).

According to Abram, the best way to describe this heightened form of apprehension is to use a word coined by Levy-Bruhl in his study of indigenous, oral societies — the word "participation". This word emphasises the experience of active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Whereas Macmurray emphasizes the need for the sense of touch "over against" the sense of sight, Abram, using Merleau-Ponty, coins the word "synaesthesia" to denote the necessity of combining or blending the different senses in the apprehension of reality. Yet he admits also to the priority of the tactile in the sense that there is some sort of reciprocation involved when we touch an object. We become aware that we are touched in return, whereas we are not obviously aware that we are seen in return when we look at an object, for example.

Abram makes the point that Merleau-Ponty's work on reciprocity and perception is "startlingly" consonant with the world-views of indigenous, oral cultures. He points out that these people are never really alone, since their surroundings are continually aware, sensate, or personified:

> They feel. They can be offended. And they must, at every moment, be treated with proper respect (Abram 1996: 49).

Using Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as a philosophical springboard, Abram then delves into the significance of their insights to our appreciation and understanding of primal cultures, continually drawing comparisons between these and modern cultures. The entire experience of reality is linked, in these cultures, with an immediate reciprocity between perceiver and perceived, in a world consisting of beings in a constant state of communication. This has profound consequences for primal notions of time, space and being as well as for language, logic, and community. Take, for example, the issue of language, which, by definition, is the most obvious form of reciprocation and exchange. In oral cultures, according to Abram, language encourages the participatory life of the

senses, while in Western culture the abstract realm is valorised and senses distrusted. Merleau-Ponty argued that language is essentially an extension of the interconnected matrix of sensorial reality itself:

> It is this dynamic, interconnected reality that provokes and sustains all our speaking, lending something of its structure to all our various languages (Abram 1996: 85).

Language inscribes us into this animate universe. Yet not all cultures have this ability to engage linguistically with the environment. There is a direct relationship between the animatedness of the environment, the orality of the culture within such an environment, and the integratedness of the language and its users with such an environment. Conversely, the more objectified the environment, the more coded or written the language and the more readily separable from the environment it and its users can become. The connectedness between a language and the intersubjective landscape out of which it emerges will determine that language's ability not only to reflect but to transform its environment. Primal cultures may believe in the power of the spoken word to transform reality — that words themselves take on a magical quality.

The question that engages Abram most has to do with the processes whereby the primordial state of affairs of participation and engagement gave way to the modern state of affairs characterised by non-participation and disengagement as well as with the role that language played in these processes. He points out that a long line of philosophers, stretching from Nietzsche to the present day, have drawn attention to the fact that Plato's derogation of the sensible world and assertion that it was merely a simulacrum of the pure realm of eternal ideas beyond the sensory realm, contributed to western civilisation's distrust of the body and consequent estrangement from the earthly world. Associated with this estrangement has been the development of the written word as the major means of communication, linear concepts of time, and the autonomisation of being. All of these have progressively contributed to the process of disengagement. According to Abram, the alphabet was originally a visual depiction of aspects of the environment. But as soon as the depiction gave abstract forms to things in the environment a certain distance was created between a thing and its alphabetic equivalent. This led to a progressive abstraction of linguistic meaning from the life-world. Before

the written alphabet became established, communication was through stories and ritual. To gain influence the alphabet had to align itself with these oral traditions. The first major written texts were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* which were, in fact, originally oral texts or stories. But as the language becomes written a measure of detachment is allowed:

> In the alphabetized document the medium became objectified. There it was, reproduced perfectly in the alphabet [...] no longer just a function of 'me' the speaker but a document with an independent existence [...] The scribe or author could now begin to dialogue with his own visible inscriptions, viewing and responding to his own words even as he wrote them down. A new power of reflexivity was thus coming into existence, borne by the relation between the scribe and his scripted text (Abram 1996: 107).

Historically, the juncture at which this occurred was between the largely illiterate Socrates and his beginning-to-be-literate student Plato, in the early fourth century BCE. It is not coincidental that it was around the same time that the numinous powers, or gods, were beginning to be expelled from the natural surroundings. Prior to Socrates, in the world of Homer, for example, there was a storied universe with endlessly repeated myths and legends embodying notions of justice, virtue and morality. These were experienced as living events arising in specific circumstances and inseparable from specific people and actions. Socrates initiated the break with the oral tradition by shocking the storytellers out of their "mnemonic trance [...] and hence out of the sensuous, storied realm to which they were accustomed" (Abram 1996: 110). When, for example, Socrates asked his fellow Athenians what they meant by virtue, they could not abstract such a quality out of the lived situation from which it was called forth. But Socrates was not interested in the embodied element of virtue, and rather sought an abstract and unchanging notion of the term. Plato took this even further and tried to define all knowledge in terms of pure ideas, essences that have their shadow in lived reality which, according to him, was no true reality at all.

Associated with the abstraction of ideas from the sensuous environment in which they find their origin and the separation of words from the concrete things that they depict is the abstraction of the very self, the body. A new, profoundly reflexive sense of the self in which one is able to dialogue with one's own words after writing them down "enables

a new sense of autonomy and independence from others … and from the sensuous surroundings" (Abram 1996: 112). Thus the literate self develops a sense of transcendence from its surroundings — an autonomy that Socrates called the psyche which, in the modern context, has become identified with rationality.

Associated, in turn, with the abstraction of ideas from the environment, of words from the objects which they depict, and of the self from the body, is the inevitable abstraction of time from space. Abram confirms the startling insight of Anthony Giddens that modernity has to do with the ability to separate time from space. The dynamism of modernity, says Giddens (1990: 16),

> ... derives from the separation of time and space and their recombination in forms which permit the precise time-space zoning of social life; the disembedding of social systems; and the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups.

At its most basic level the abstraction of time from space occurred when the writing down of stories rendered them separable from the places where the events in them took place. These places gave the stories their potency. Once written down the visible text itself becomes the prime mnemonic activator of the spoken stories. Thus the stories lose their oral performative character and forfeit their intimate links with the "more than human" earth. The spirits fall silent. Gradually, the felt primacy of place is forgotten, superseded by a new, abstract notion of "space" as a homogeneous and placeless void (Abram 1996: 184).

With the emergence of abstract notions of space there came also abstract, linear notions of time. Oral peoples living in a primal universe do not understand linear notions of time. This is because their connection with the earth demonstrated constantly to them the circular life of the sun and moon, the cycling of the seasons and the death and rebirth of all physical life. The cyclic passage of time is repeated in the stories told by the story-tellers, and in the telling of the stories there is an active participation in the creative process of renewal of the events that are being told. Mircea Eliade (1959: 108) has shown in his *Cosmos and history: the myth of the eternal return* that "indigenous peoples inhabit a cyclical time periodically regenerated through the ritual repetition of mythic events". Abram argues that space and time in such cultures are

indistinguishable. Space, being identified with place, is by definition temporal. It occupies present time. Linear time, moreover, was "discovered", according to Mircea Eliade, by the ancient Hebrews when non-repeating, often catastrophic events such as the exodus from Egypt or the exile from the Promised Land, associated with the will of Yahweh and specifically identified with a rupture between the land and the people, gave rise to the notion of a progressive history as we know it. What Eliade does not point out, according to Abram, is the fact that the ancient Hebrews happened also to be the People of the Book, the first to emphasise the fixed nature of the word encapsulated in the tablets of the Law and the written word of God. When the people of Israel were cut off from the land they were thus able to preserve the memory of it through the written text, which became a kind of portable homeland for the Hebrew people.

I have attempted thus far to demonstrate that in the philosophy of John Macmurray and the phenomenologists we have a clear analogue with the apprehension of reality that obtains in primal cultures. While Macmurray makes only a very brief and passing, though sympathetic, reference to "primitive" cultures (Macmurray 1953: 117) and the phenomenologists themselves do not refer to such cultures, Abram consciously links the two and I have linked these, in turn, with Macmurray's thinking. The purpose of making these linkages between thinking that has taken place in the West (linked usually with modernity) and that which has taken place in the South (linked usually with pre-modernity) is to demonstrate that an alternative paradigm to mainstream Western philosophy and very similar to the world-view of primal cultures has been in the making in the West ever since the destructive and alienating tendencies of the dominant paradigm have become evident. There are, of course, many other voices to be heard with similar sentiments. Significant among these are those associated with process thinking. Thomas Berry, for example, argues that the religious and scientific-technological thought of Western spirituality has taken us to our present forms of alienation and that this is essentially at odds with how we experience the world. He singles out four conceptions that have contributed to this condition: (1) the identification of the divine as transcendent to the natural world, so that the natural world became less capable of communicating divine presence; (2) the establishment of the human as transcendent to the natural world, so that the world was transformed into

crass matter, raw material for human consumption; (3) the millennial vision of a blessed future accessible to history through technological progress; and (4) the stress on salvation dynamics to the neglect of creation dynamics, so that our eyes could be turned away from our abuse of the earth to focus on moral revivalism and pious causes (Griffin 1989: 172).

Hopper has described the renewed interest in alternative epistemologies as being characterised by a shift from the dominance of *Logos* (classical logic) to *Mythos* (rootedness in experience) (Griffin 1989: 116). In science the movement is discernible in the shift from Newtonian to quantum physics, in philosophy from rationalism to dynamism and in theology from dogma to process. The consequence of this shift has been a recognition of the open-endedness of the universe, a fundamental unity between the knower and the known, and an openness to the divine. In other words, the movement is from a mechanistic to a vitalistic view of the universe. Such a shift, because it is radically different from the rationalism of modernity, has been described as "non-rational" (cf Griffin 1989). Restoring to the non-rational, as a condition describing the antithesis of the rational, "its own unique and particular frame of reference" is an essential project (Griffin 1989: 185). Three features of the non-rational, in particular, need to be rehabilitated, namely the experience of the world around us in terms of the numinous, the personification of the "map of the psyche", and the re-mythologising of our lives by "rereading [...] the stories we tell of our lives in the light of archetypal stories which have come to us in our corporate tradition" (Griffin 1989: 185).

All of these attributes, mooted by the above scholars as desirable, are to be found in the philosophies outlined in this essay. But while the philosophies of Macmurray and the phenomenologists are overshadowed by the Cartesian/Kantian traditions of the West, they would be far better understood in parts of the world where the primal world-view is still in evidence. In this sense, what is embarked on as a project to rediscover and restore what Heisig has called the "non-rational" to Western philosophy is, for many other civilisations, normative.

This should not be construed, however, as exemplifying an ideal or romantic state of affairs. Modernity has impacted on the world powerfully enough to profoundly re-shape the ways in which the primal world-view operates. When the British waged war on the Xhosa or the

Spanish waged war on the Aztecs the confrontation of world-views led to the ultimate destruction of the primal cultures. If these cultures have not been completely destroyed they have nevertheless still been deeply affected by the "reflexive ordering and re-ordering of social relations" described by Giddens. This means that the disruptive, profoundly alienating effects of modernity have often elicited a resurgence of belief in the traditions of the forefathers, which are resorted to with extra zeal in order to restore balance and equilibrium to the disturbed foundations of the cosmos. The story of Nonqawuse is a classic example.[2]

4. Conclusion

The interaction between so-called "primitive" and "advanced" societies has provided the backdrop for much speculation about the nature of humankind in general and human thought in particular. Violent though the earliest encounters were — both politically and epistemologically — when the occasion arose for more eirenic reflection Western scholars could not contain their profound fascination with their "primitive" counterparts. This fascination was usually linked with the notion that "primitive man" would indicate to "modern man" what it was about humankind that was truly universal. Ironically, however, the Primitive has been cast not in the mould of the universally prototypical human being but in that of the Wholly Other. Rousseau created romantic images of the "noble savage"; Sartre demonstrated the extraordinarily potent effect of this "savage" on the world of the European; Derrida continued in the Sartrian tradition by asserting that in the encounter with this wholly other lay the seeds of the demise of modernity; J M Coetzee (1974: 69) explores the possibility of the first encounter between Boer and Bushman as being the first and the last time that they meet as equals. The Bushman themselves depicted these encounters in their rock art, sometimes drawing the Boers with huge penises, riding horses and firing guns.

For philosophers, too, the "Primitive" has become a sounding board for what constitutes rationality. Every chapter in Hollis & Lukes' book

2 See Errol Moorcroft's "Theories of millenarianism considered with reference to certain Southern African movements" (unpubl BLitt thesis, Oxford 1967) for a detailed explanation of the Xhosa cattle-killing in this light.

Rationality and relativism (1982) uses examples from non-Western ways of thinking to explore the relationship between rationality and relativism. All of the authors in this book hover around and between the two opposite poles of rationality, which is predicated on a universalism of some kind, and relativism, which concedes the notion of different socially constructed universes of meaning. Those that cluster around one pole are usually determined to discredit the ideas of those clustered around the other. None explore the moral or spiritual dynamics of the historical encounters between the West and the rest. These encounters, I have tried to assert in this paper, were indeed encounters between profoundly different ways of apprehending reality, one defined by engagement and the other by disengagement. But they were also encounters between human beings. And in this sense the way they perceived reality could not be divorced from the way that they expressed their humanity. Ways of seeing the world are clearly linked with ways of being in the world. "Modern man" described by Tarnas as "a newly self-conscious and autonomous human being — curious about the world, confident in his own judgements, sceptical of orthodoxies" (Barrett 2003: 57), has a qualitatively different way of being in the world from "primitive man", whom Turner describes as having a "deep sense that humankind is finite and weak and in need of a supernatural power" (Bediako 1995: 94). Such a stance toward the world, linked with an understanding of the world as being personal rather than material, makes the primal world-view a continuing source of fascination and attraction for the moderns who, a long time ago, more or less lost it.

Bibliography

ABRAM D
1996. *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books.

APPIAH K
1992. *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ASHFORTH A
2000. *Madumo — a man bewitched*. Cape Town: David Philip.

BALCOMB A
1995. Modernity and the African experience. *Bulletin for Contextual Theology* 3(2): 12-20.

BARRETT P
2003. *Science and theology since Copernicus: a search for understanding*. Pretoria: UNISA Press.

BEDIAKO K
1995. *Christianity in Africa: the renewal of a non-western religion*. Edinburgh: Orbis.

BERRY T
1989. The mystique of the nonrational and a new spirituality. Whitehead & Griffin (eds) 1989: 167-202.

COETZEE J M
1974. *Dusklands*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press

COMAROFF J
1995. *Modernity and its malcontents: ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DESCARTES R
1994. *A discourse on method: meditations and principles*. London: JM Dent.

ELIADE M
1959. *Cosmos and history, the myth of the eternal return*. New York: Harper & Row.

GUNTON C
1993. *The one, the three, and the many: God, creation and the culture of modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

HALLEN B & J SODIPO
1997. *Knowledge, belief, and witchcraft: analytic experiments in African philosophy*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

HEISIG J
1989. The mystique of the nonrational and a new spirituality. Whitehead & Griffin (eds) 1989: 167-202.

HOLLIS M & S LUKES
1982. *Rationality and relativism*. Oxford: Blackwells.

HOPPER S R
1989. Once more: the cavern beneath the cave. Whitehead & Griffin (eds) 1989: 107-24.

HORTON R
1993. *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West: essays on magic, religion, and science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LYOTARD J F
1984. *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

MACMURRAY J
1953. *The self as agent*. London: Faber and Faber.

MILBANK J
1995. *Theology and social theory: beyond secular reason*. Oxford: Blackwells.

MUDIMBE V Y
1985. African gnosis philosophy and the order of knowledge: an introduction. *African Studies Review* 28(2/3): 149-234.

OTTO R
1959. *The idea of the holy*. London: Oxford University Press.

POLKINGHORNE J
1994. *Quarks, chaos and Christianity: questions to science and religion*. London: Triangle.

SETILOANE G
1986. *African theology: an introduction*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.

TAYLOR J V
1975. *The primal vision: Christian presence and African religion*. London: SCM.

TEMPELS P
1959. *Bantu philosophy*. Paris: Présence Africaine.

TODOROV T
1992. *The conquest of America: the question of the other*. New York: Harper Perennial.

TORRANCE T
1997. *God and rationality*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

TOURAINE A
1995. *A critique of modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

WHITEHEAD J & H D GRIFFIN (eds)
1989. *Archetypal process: self and divine*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.