

Epicureans and American Indians

One of the other great philosophical doctrines of antiquity was Epicureanism. Rackham in his introduction to Cicero's *De Nature Deorum* says: "Epicurus [based] his main theory of nature ... upon the atomism of Democritus, holding that the real universe consists in innumerable atoms of matter moving by the force of gravity through an infinity of empty space. Our world and all its contents, and also innumerable other worlds, are temporary clusters of atoms fortuitously collected together in the void; they are constantly forming and constantly dissolving, without plan or purpose . . . The gods (like everything else) consist of fortuitous clusters of atoms . . . But it is impious to fancy that gods are burdened with the labor of upholding or guiding the universe; the worlds go on of themselves, by purely mechanical causation; the gods live a life of undisturbed bliss in the intermundia, the empty regions of space between the worlds."

Epicureans speak of a universe in which there is irreducible chance, disorder, probabilities, and unpredictability. Stoics speak of a universe in which there is order, law, regularity and certainties, perhaps to the point of complete determinism.

It's possible to have it both ways. A number of American Indian groups had views of the universe which combined chance and order. These views are often characterized as myths. Depending on the status one gives to myths, they may not be rated as serious philosophies of life like those of Epicureans and Stoics. Still, for the people who believed them, they were attempts to understand ways of the world, and guides for living in it.

Native Americans were not always naïve about their astral beliefs. Some attributed errors of their astronomers to incompetence. In his *Living the Sky* (1984), Ray Williamson speaks about the sun-watchers, functionaries of the Pueblo Indians, the Hopi and Zuni, who maintained a kind of solar horizon calendar by monitoring positions of the sun from day to day. They correlated them with various ceremonies, e.g., at the solstices. Williamson reports a journal entry for April 18, 1921, made by Crow Wing, a Hopi Indian: "We think the Sun-Watcher is not a very good man. He missed some places, he was wrong last year. All the people think that is why we had so much cold this winter and no snow."

Ray Williamson says in his *Living the Sky* that the *hogan*, a traditional version of a typical dwelling of the Navajo Indians, appears in their creation myths as the home of many different creatures, and also as a place of creation. The stars are created there. The universe is ordered like the hogan is ordered, but it also contains mischievous forces of disorder. Coyote, a trickster, introduces disorder into the heavens by upsetting the intended orderly arrangement of the stars. The Sun, though reluctant and protesting, assumes responsibility for his children, but Coyote leaves confusion or worse behind. Coyote threw the stars into the sky in a haphazard manner, and he chose October, a changeable and uncertain month, to be his.



On the other hand, Williamson says of the Chumash Indians of California that for them the entire universe and the supernatural powers within it are constantly in flux. Without supernatural intervention from humans, the powers of the world could produce cataclysmic events. The Indians had shamans who had the duty of seeking knowledge from celestial beings, of foreseeing the future, and of taking steps to alter the upcoming course of events to benefit their fellow Chumash. The shamans had to be careful to watch for just the right moment to do this so they wouldn't bring ill to their people.

In his capacity as a classicist, the poet A. E. Housman (1859-1936) edited the *Astronomica*, a long poem on astrology written by Manilius in the 1st century A.D. Manilius was a strict determinist who believed we are ruled by the stars. Housman once said that his elaborate work on Manilius's poem would be remembered long after his own poems were forgotten. However this may be, while Housman bowed to a kind of determinism, some part of him was free, to judge from this poem by him:

*The laws of God, the laws of man,
He may keep that will and can;
Not I: let God and man decree
Laws for themselves and not for me;
And if my ways are not as theirs
Let them mind their own affairs.
Their deeds I judge and much condemn,
But when did I make laws for them?
Please yourselves, say I, and they
Need only look the other way.
But no, they will not; they must still
Wrest their neighbor to their will,
And make me dance as they desire
With jail and gallows and hell-fire.
And how am I to face the odds
Of Man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.
They will be master, right or wrong:
Though both are foolish, both are strong.
And since, my soul, we cannot fly
To Saturn nor to Mercury,
Keep we must, if we can,
These foreign laws of God and man.*

Nowadays, many people believe that mankind is changing according to some master plan, towards some goal. This is not so according to many Darwinian evolutionary theories. People who believe in the universality of such evolution would likely not accept many kinds of Stoicism. Evolution proceeds randomly, they believe, so they would be more likely to accept an Epicureanism.

Many wish to be saved from a world ruled by capricious chance. One way among many to seek salvation is to have a faith in astrology.