

The Rainbow

Reflect for a moment on that experience we all have had, think of a “rainbow” and then that of a “tree.” What are they really?

While returning home to Colorado after completing an ethnographic project with the Apsáalooke on the Crow Reservation during the late 1970s, I had the following experience. It firmly brought home what Owen Barfield, a British philosopher, had first articulated for me in his insightful work, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (1965:15).

I had just come out of the downpour as I sped south on the Interstate Highway. Except for the sun's radiance from the west, the sky remained dark blue. Then I saw it, bright and clear, not more than a quarter mile to the east. With all its vivid colors, the rainbow emerged from the ground, arced and re-entered. It was a perfect rainbow.



Alaskan Rainbow photo: Joseph Rolph 2005

But the perfect rainbow had something special to offer that afternoon. As I continued south, the rainbow seemed to move with me. I passed a wooded area, then a deep coulee, now a ranch house; at each site the rainbow touched

down and moved across. I slowed my car to sneak a picture with the camera; the arc of color slowed as well. I sped up; it sped up. A hill rose a few hundred feet from the car; the rainbow touched down so close that I could almost run my fingers through its vibrant colors. I soon realized that this was my own special rainbow. Did others see my rainbow traveling south with me, even as many other drivers traveled north? No one else would indeed see it as I saw it.

Others who traveled that highway may also have seen a rainbow, even at the very same moment I saw mine, but their's were not mine. It was a gift to me alone. And I gave thanks.

So I asked myself, what makes up my "rainbow," what are its constitute elements, its properties? Certainly the mist of the rain and the light of the sun are critical elements. But is not a certain interaction also necessary? The light must refract off the mist. And was there something else still needed? *I saw* that particular interaction of light and mist. Would a "rainbow" even exist without me physically perceiving it, without me seeing the light and mist in a particular relationship and angle with each other relative to myself? And would "rainbow" have a particular significance to me, be identified as meaningful, if I hadn't already have some sort of learned, conceptual schema of "rainbowness." And I asked myself, is not the experience of the "rainbow" more than it's constitute properties, but fundamentally the interaction between them – water particles suspended in the air, light emanating from the sun, my physical perception and my cognitive conception – coming into existence as the transitory intersection of all these component participants, a dynamic event always in the making? My "rainbow" had existence not as a discrete object in the sky but as a relationship of its many participants.

And as I drove on, a grove of trees made their appearance, with one tree in particular standing out on a knoll. And I asked myself, how fundamentally different is that transitory intersection I call "rainbow" from that which I called "tree"? Are not both the "raindrops" and "fibrous limbs and leaves of a tree" not made up of similar elemental, constitute properties, of what Owen Barfield refers to as "particles," just simply arranged differently, distinguished only in that one set of properties is on a much slower temporal scale – a fleeting rainbow vs. a much slower growing tree? And I would ask myself, if a "rainbow" is the result on my perceptual and conceptual interaction and particular relationship with raindrops and sunlight, would it not follow that a "tree" is also the result of my interaction and particular relationship with a hard, fibrous growth? And would not all of that which you and I assume to be "reality" ultimately be

composed of a myriad of participants in a complex web of transitory interactions with one another?