

MARY DOUGLAS. *Thinking in Circles. An Essay on Ring Composition.*

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Thinking in Circles became the last study by Mary Douglas (1921–2007) which was published during her life time. During her long career she studied a wide diversity of classical anthropological themes like purity, ritual, community and the nature of thought, but also maintained an interest in biblical studies and the study of risk in modern society. Douglas was known for her fieldwork among the Leles in the Democratic Republic of Congo (at the time the Belgian Congo) in 1949 and the early 1950s. She taught anthropology from 1951 to 1977 at the University College of London. In 1977 she moved to the United States to teach anthropology in several universities, and she lived in the country until her retirement in 1988. At the time of her death in 2007 she was an Honorary Research Fellow at the University College of London. She also held the title Fellow of the British Academy from 1989.

One of the greatest contributions made to anthropology by Mary Douglas was her insight that ritual theory can be as applicable to modern society as to ‘primitive’ environments. While Douglas relativized the questions of ethnically and structurally defined purity, her work has always contained a strong emphasis on finding the order of the communities she studies. This Durkheimian order orientation continues in *Thinking in Circles* where the author explicitly admires the strong structure of the texts arranged in “ring composition” while devaluing the looser forms of (post)modernity. Douglas defines ring composition as “a construction of parallelism that must open a theme, develop it, and round it off by bringing the conclusion back to beginning” (p. x). The meaning in this form is not at the end as in linear text, she claims, but in the middle, which is thematically connected to the beginning and the end, and she goes on to recount seven detailed rules for recognizing ring composition (p. 35–38).

Douglas compares ring composition to the better known antique form of *chiasmus*, which can be found for example in Finnish oral poetry, Rumi’s Persian poems or in Rigveda. Referencing anthropologist James Fox, Douglas lists numerous other examples of a ring-like writing style from several different ages and different places (p. 4–5). Following Roman Jakobson, she believes this composition style to be universal and stored in the structure of the human brain (p. 99–100), with both the chiasmic model and ring composition having a form describable as ABCBA. With ring composition, however, Douglas refers to larger-scale structures, like the architecture of a whole building as opposed to its decorative ornamentation (p. xii).

Douglas has already given some attention to ring composition in her book *In the Wilderness* (1993). In her discussion and analysis one can read the continuous and even exaggerated seeking of order for which she became famous with *Purity and Danger* (1966) and a simultaneous engagement in pattern perception, which she herself claims to be very important for anthropologists. Her problem, which she calls Jakobson’s conundrum, is the following: why is this particular type of literary structure (ring), though common across the globe, so badly understood in the West where it is considered to be “disarray, chaotic, disordered and clumsy” (p. 11)? Instead of confusion, Douglas finds in such texts a sophistication and brilliance of structure which has been carefully composed by the texts’ authors.

In *Thinking in circles* Douglas continues her long-lasting interest in biblical study as she offers an analysis of the literary structure of the *Book of Numbers* (chapters four and five). Her analysis also offers a text from the *Torah* accompanied by a careful analysis of the Homeric *Iliad* and the more recent *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. Her method is careful reading which tries to grasp the thinking behind the text. For example, after querying who might have written the *Book of Numbers* and for what political purpose, she suggests that the elite priests of Aaronic lineage may have authored the text while trying to legitimize their endangered position as spiritual leaders during the politically anti-Aaronic and xenophobic time of governor Ezra (chapter five). Douglas believes that ring composition has much to do with these kinds of power struggles: being able to prove literary competence was very important in many archaic literate societies and still is, for example, in today's Somalia (p. 27–30).

Writing as an anthropologist especially interested in anthropology of religion, I feel it would have been very interesting to read more about the connections between the ring composition and the author's specialization: ritual theory. Has ring composition really nothing to do with ritual circles? In earlier studies, the origin of ring composition was supposedly strongly located in oral cultures, a theory Douglas sidesteps as speculative (p. 12) in her focus on the literary brilliance of the form. However, oral performances in various cultures are often held in a circle which might be connected to the "mental structure" which Douglas finds behind the ring composition and believes to be universal (p. 99–100), and more attention to the question of origin would have been in order. For example, many Karelian fairy tales which have their origins in oral tradition seemingly follow the rules of ring composition as defined by Douglas. Does not a similar need for rituals, and similar cerebral complexity, exist in all human societies despite our "degree of modernity"—something which Douglas amongst others has always stressed? Cannot artistic composition be sophisticated also when it is possibly produced collectively?

Despite this criticism I can recommend Douglas's book for all anthropologists interested in the nature of thought—something Douglas examined for many decades. Her study is an important example of how literary sources can be used to address these questions. Furthermore, the book is of course also important for literary scholars interested in texts composed in the ring form common to the Bible and many other archaic texts.

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