Is Native American Philosophy An Oxymoron?

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There is one great divide in comparative philosophy. While the vast majority of philosophers are willing to consider the ideas of non-western civilizations such as India, China, and Japan worthy of study, there continues to be a considerable amount of resistance to study of the ideas of those cultures variously called traditional, native, or if one is hopelessly politically incorrect, primitive.[1] While most of what I have to say concerns all cultures of this type, my interest is primarily the ideas of Native North Americans.

A number of reasons have been put forth for rejecting the thought of traditional cultures. First, it is argued, the ideas of native cultures are not *really* different from those of the West, since the Western worldview is "common-sensical" and obviously, no one could really believe the ideas that native cultures are reported to believe. This argument is rather obviously either false or circular. If it is saying that the reports of both anthropologists and native peoples are wrong, then some sort of evidence must be put forth to support this claim. I know of no case in which such data have been forthcoming. If, on the other hand, the argument is that native peoples just *think* that they have beliefs which differ from those of the West because the native idea doesn't make sense, all the arguer is doing is begging the question and proving his or her own failure to understand the ideas put forth. It is clearly the responsibility of the person denying that there can be more than one common sense view of the world to prove this assertion.

A second argument is that the ideas of primitive peoples are, well, primitive. What the West believes is religion, metaphysics, and science, while what the native person believes is superstition. At the lowest level this seems to be nothing more than an ad hominem argument, and hardly worth discussing. However, a residual feeling of unease remains when the philosopher is confronted with a doctrine which requires that rocks be animate,[2] that witchcraft works,[3] and that game animals have rights.[4]

However, I feel that I can show that Native American philosophy is not making the "absurd" assertions that one gets by putting Native American ideas into the terminology of the West. If one says that "rocks are animate," one has already accepted that the categories "animate" and "inanimate" exist and exhaust the possible categories of the real world. However, it is possible to develop a different system of categorization for the real world, one in which entities are divided on some other basis, such as that of "having an influence" or "not having an influence."

I would like to consider a trivial example, one which I nevertheless encounter every day, the Coke machine in my building. What category does it belong to? If we are to categorize it in terms of animate or inanimate, it is clearly inanimate, since it is a machine. If I talk about the Coke machine as animate, then it is certainly appropriate to term my thinking primitive. Only a child or someone who has never encountered a Coke machine, or indeed any machine, would claim that such a machine has a personality. However, I can ask the question differently; that is, I can ask, "Does the Coke machine ever treat me unfairly?" Within the Western system of thought and Indo-European languages this question assumes that the Coke machine is animate, since only animate things can be said to be fair or unfair.

However, if I examine my reaction to the Coke machine, I must admit that I respond to it as if it is unfair. About one time out of three, it won't give me a Coke and I get mad at it. As it happens, I have discovered the origin of this treatment in the scanning system it uses to evaluate dollar bills. Thus, one model which I have to describe the Coke machine looks deterministically at its mechanism. This deterministic model agrees with the categorization of "inanimate," since macroscopic, inanimate objects definitely exhibit deterministic causation, while animate objects may be indeterministic.

However, I still get mad. I believe that the category system which I am using in this case is that of influencing and indifferent entities. Just as one can categorize seals as mammals if one is interested in taxonomy and sea creatures if one is interested in habitats, so the Coke machine can be categorized an inanimate if one is an engineer, but it can also be meaningfully categorized as a thing which influences me, one time out of three badly. This seems to be what is happening when an Ojibwa man tells the anthropologist that "sometimes rocks do things." This category is not well worked out and is based only on my personal observation of the use of normally animate terms like "fair," "mad," etc. in the speech of myself and other people influenced by Five Tribes Culture in Oklahoma. Before accusing me of irrationality, I would ask you to consider whether, indeed, you don't often use a similar point of view in evaluating, say, whether or not the xerox machine will work. Doesn't it always malfunction when you are in a hurry?

This is the briefest sketch of how Native American philosophy may avoid charges of irrationality or primitiveness. As I am sure can be seen, a great deal of work needs to be done.

This brings me to the next objection which has been made to the possibility of philosophy by native peoples, since this objection would make the possibility of such work as I have sketched impossible. It has been argued that philosophy proceeds by considering texts and as, by definition, traditional cultures are either not literate, or have only recently become literate, they lack the sorts of texts needed to make philosophic discourse possible.[5]

I would like to propose that this confuses current philosophic practice with philosophy. It is certainly true that a great deal of philosophy is now involved in the analysis of texts. However, an examination of the history of philosophy, even in the West, demonstrates that this has not always been the case.

Socrates, obviously, neither analyzed texts nor generated them. In his view, in so far as we can learn it from the writings of Plato, philosophy was not the sort of thing that could be reduced to writing.[6] Indeed, the usage, "reduce to writing" demonstrates the fact that the written word has not always been considered to be *the* ultimate means of communication. Clearly, we would not wish to claim that Socrates was not a philosopher.

In the period before Socrates, philosophers who did not produce or consider texts were even more common. While the evidence is good that Heraclitus wrote at least one work,[7] it is unlikely that Thales or Pythagoras[8] did so.

In early Greek philosophy, the usual model of philosophy was that of discourse, dialectic, face to face communication between people. It might later be written down, but as Plato's use of the dialogue shows us, the basic model was that of speech. The founding of the Academy was required by the need, expressed by Plato in Letter Seven,[9] to communicate true philosophy in person.

Thus, I would like to suggest that Native American philosophy is at roughly the point Western philosophy was at during the lifetime of Socrates. As we have learned more about the antecedents of Greek philosophy, we have seen that the various Presocratic philosophers were making use of the ideas available to them within their contemporary culture.

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere,[10] while the search for an αρχη was at least somewhat motivated by a rational and even scientific purpose, the idea that an αρχη existed was embedded in the Greek language and culture. Likewise, the varying forms it took in the views of particular Presocratic philosophers were at least in part derived from the ideas of myth. For example, the writing of Pherecydes[11], discovered in this century, show an intermediate stage of this development, in which the ideas of myth are still clearly the origin of the ideas which Thales would express later.

Thus, I would conceive of the Presocratic stage in philosophy to be one in which various philosophers considered what the implications of their common culture would be for a rationally developed worldview. Since all that they had available to them were myths, language, and "common sense," these are what they used to construct their particular positions.

After about 150 years of development, Aristotle could look back and observe that one common motif was that of the search for αρχη.[12] It is quite possible, however, that the Presocratics did not actually use the term,[13] or if they did, it was not yet a technical term. In reading the Presocratic Fragments, one is constantly

struck by the lack of a technical language and, clearly, developing such a language was one of the major tasks of Western philosophy's first one hundred and fifty years.

Native American philosophy is in precisely the same situation. Thoughtful Native Americans observe the basic principles that underlie the myths, language and common-sense of their respective cultures. Just as the myths of the Greeks had only fairly recently been committed to writing,[14] Native American myths have been written down only within the last four hundred years. Just as the Greeks had been fully literate only for a few hundred years at the time of Thales,[15] Native Americans in North America have been introduced to writing only within the last one to four hundred years.[16] Last, just as a common set of ideas existed among Greek thinkers which had not yet been explicated and whose implications had not yet been explored, so Native American cultures have ideas ready to be dealt with in a philosophic manner.

This brings me to three additional questions which have been asked about Native American philosophy. Since the answer to any one of these questions would require yet another paper as long as this one, I will be able to give only the briefest comment.

First, it has been asked whether there is any place in the study of Native American philosophy for non-Native Americans. Continuing my analogy to Presocratic philosophy, I would point out that once a few basic ideas were put forth, anyone who was in contact with Greek culture could join the debate. Certainly by Hellenic times, many of the people contributing to Greek philosophy were not Greek. Obviously, Euro-Americans will have to have contact with Native cultures, but at least in the Southwest, it would be difficult not to have such contact.

Second, can there be such a subject as Native American philosophy, rather than Native American philosophies, given the large number of Native American groups? Again, drawing on my analogy, Greek culture was hardly homogenous during the Presocratic period. However, there was what we might call a "pan-Greek" culture developing which would eventually develop into the later Hellenic culture. Likewise, as Native Americans are in contact with each other, a "pan-Indianism" has developed, as shown by the Native American Church and the "pow-wow" phenomena. However, I suspect that Native American philosophy will need to identify itself, at least regionally, for some period of time in the future.

Third, what will be the effects of the primarily rural nature of Native American cultures, given that Western philosophy has always been an urban phenomenon? This is a question which only time can answer. However, I would suggest that the "information superhighway" will make where one lives increasingly less important. Again I see a considerable similarity to the Presocratic Period, in which the implications of general literacy were just beginning to be explored.

In conclusion, then, I would like to suggest that Native American philosophy is not only not an oxymoron, but is a valuable field of study which should be developed. Western philosophy has benefited enormously by the insights provided by non-Western civilizations. The little work that has been don, such as Callicott's on ecology,[17] suggest that as much may be gained by examining the ideas of Native America.

Notes

1. I have become aware of this resistance, both in attending conferences at which I was the "token Indian," and in responses I have received to a Conference on Native American philosophy which will take place this summer.

2. A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," in *Teachings From the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Dennis and Barbara Tedlock (N.Y.: Liveright, 1975), p. 148.

3. John R. Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navaho Philosophy* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1984), pp. 37-38.

4. Thomas W. Overholt and J. Baird Callicott, *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales: An Introduction to an Ojibwa World View* (Boston: University Press of America, 1982), p. 19.

5. This objection was raised by several philosophers, including Richard Rorty, at the Seventh East-West Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, in January, 1995.

6. Walter Kaufmann and Forrest E. Baird, *From Plato to Nietzsche* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1994), p. 2.

7. G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 185.

8. *Ibid., pp. 85 and 221.*

9. Plato, "The Seventh Letter" 341C.

10. Lee Stauffer, *The Relation of Ancient Near Eastern Myth to the Ionian Presocratic View of Water and Earth.* Dissertation for the Ph.D. in Philosophy (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico, 1985), pp. 372-405.

11. Published in: M.L. West, *Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 1-13.

12. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*: 983-985.

13. Kirk and Raven, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

14. Michael Grant, *The Rise of the Greeks* (New York: Scribner's, 1987), p. 130.

15. The exact date that the alphabet was introduced to Greece is the subject of enormous debate at the moment. The dates proposed extend from the end of the Bronze Age (1000 B.C. – Naveh) to the date of the first archeological artifact with Greek writing on it (750 B.C. – Dow). This is similar to the range of time during which various Native American groups have been exposed to writing.

Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Paleography* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1982), pp. 175-186.

Sterling Dow, "Literacy: The Palace Bureaucracies, the Dark Ages, and Homer," in *A Land Called Crete: A Symposium in Memory of Harriet Boyd Hawes* (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1967), p. 127.

16. I am obviously ignoring the witting systems in Mesoamerica, primarily because I am not really qualified to deal with them. They form, however, an interesting corpus of texts for philosophic analysis, a task begun by Dennis Tedlock.

Dennis Tedlock, *Breath on the Mirror* (San Francisco, CA.: Harper, 1993).

17. J. Baird Callicott, "Traditional American Indian and Western European Attitudes Toward Nature: An Overview," in *Applied Ethics*, ed. Larry May and Shari Collins Sharratt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp 95-105.