

WHAT COYOTE AND THALES CAN TEACH US: AN OUTLINE OF AMERICAN INDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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SOME INTRODUCTORY PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Coyote is described as a philosopher in many American Indian stories. In part, this is because he wonders about things, about how they really work. Often in doing so, however, he forgets his place in the world; he does not remember how he is related. He reminds one of the stories of the beginnings of Western philosophy and the Greek thinker Thales. Plato tells us the story of "the Thracian maidservant who exercised her wit at the expense of Thales, when he was looking up to study the heavens and tumbled down a well. She scoffed at him for being so eager to know what was happening in the sky that he could not see what lay behind him and at his feet" (*Theaetetus* 174). One could quite easily replace the names in this story with Coyote and Rabbit, or Coyote and Skunk, or Coyote and Snake, and so on, and have any number of American Indian Coyote tales. Coyote, like Thales, is made fun of for his actions, actions that arise from his dislocation *vis-à-vis* the world around him.

Now, despite being objects of ridicule, Coyote and Thales seem to provide a starting point for our investigation of American Indian philosophy. But they do so by exemplifying what it is not. Plato uses the story of Thales to make clear what philosophy *is*. He explains that "[the philosopher] is unaware what his next-door neighbor is doing, hardly knows, indeed, whether the creature is a man at all; he spends all his pains on the question, what man is, and what powers and properties distinguish such a nature

from any other" (*Theaetetus* 174). The stories of Coyote, conversely, are meant to show Coyote's mistakes. Like Thales, Coyote has forgotten the simple things. He has forgotten his relations. He has forgotten what is behind him and at his feet. When Coyote behaves in this way, he always finds trouble. He is mocked in these stories because he is behaving in the wrong way. The stories are meant to show us how not to act; they show us what philosophy is not, and not, as in the case of Plato and Thales, what it is and ought to be. This is one of Coyote's stories told to me as a child:

Coyote is wandering around in his usual way when he comes upon a prairie dog town. The prairie dogs laugh and curse at him. Coyote gets angry and wants revenge. The sun is high in the sky. Coyote decides that he wants clouds to come. He is starting to hate the prairie dogs and so thinks about rain. Just then a cloud appears.

Coyote says, "I wish it would rain on me." And that is what happened.

Coyote says, "I wish there were rain at my feet." And that is what happened.

"I want the rain up to my knees," Coyote says. And that is what happened.

"I want the rain up to my waist," he then says. And that is what happened.

The water continues to rise higher and higher as Coyote thinks and speaks about it. Before long, the whole land is flooded. In this story, we are supposed to learn from Coyote's mistake, which is not letting what is right (the right way to act regarding his relatives the prairie dogs, and so forth) guide his actions, but rather acting solely on the basis of his own wants and desires. We are supposed to see also from this story that we must be careful what we do, what we want, and what we think and speak, in general. We must never forget the things around us and how we are related to those things. We can refer to this last point as the principle of relatedness. The idea here is simply that the most important things to keep in mind are the simple things that are directly around us in our experience and the things to which we are most directly related. (In calling these ideas principles, I do not mean to give them special philosophical status. In American Indian thought, they are simply ways of being. These principles are merely abstractions from these ways of being. We shall soon see that principles in the traditional philosophical sense have no place in American Indian philosophy.)

Coyote also shows us that the questions we choose to ask are more important than any truths we might hope to discover in asking such questions, since how we act impacts the way the world is, the way in which a question will get answered. The way in which we ask questions (the way in which we act toward our relations) guides us, then, to the right answers, rather than the other way around wherein what is true directs the method of questioning and the question itself (i.e., we can ask any question we desire and in any way we desire, and the answer will remain the same). We can refer to this as the limits of questioning principle. Part of what underlies this principle, besides, clearly, the principle of relatedness, is the idea that how we act is not merely a result of causal interactions with the world. How we act is not merely a response to stimuli. The world is not empty and meaningless, bearing only truth and cold facts. We participate in the meaning-making of the world. There is no world, no truth, without meaning and value, and meaning and value arise in the intersection between us and all that is around

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us. How we behave, then, in a certain sense shapes meaning, gives shape to the world. In this way, what we do, how we act, is as important as any truth and any fact. We can think of this as the meaning-shaping principle of action.

American Indians refer to this principle over and over again when asked certain questions by non-Natives. When asked such questions, Native elders will respond by saying, "We don't talk about those things," or "It is bad to talk about those things." These interdictions generally leave the questioner puzzled. But the confusion seems to arise from a lack of understanding regarding the underlying philosophical assumptions involved. With the aim of making clear these assumptions, here is a list of the principles addressed so far: first, we have the principle of relatedness and, second, that of the limits of questioning. We also have the meaning-shaping principle of action. But there is at least one other principle involved in this interdiction as these three principles are supported by a fourth that we might call "the moral universe principle." The idea is simply that the universe is moral. Facts, truth, meaning, even our existence are normative. In this way, there is no difference between what is true and what is right. On this account, then, all investigation is moral investigation. The guiding question for the entire philosophical enterprise is, then: what is the right road for humans to walk?

Now, this general shape we have given to American Indian philosophy is hardly adequate, at least as it stands. First, we have by no means gotten to the most basic principles. We have only begun to scratch the surface of what are the real underlying philosophical issues. Second, the surface principles are themselves still unclear. The second principle seems to imply that more knowledge is not always better since it seems to say that there are things we cannot or should not know. But how can there be such things? What sort of view of knowledge is at work in such a prohibition? It makes us wonder how such a thing could ever count as a view of knowledge in the first place. Furthermore, we are left wondering how such a view of knowledge would relate to the notion that right action determines truth, and not vice versa. And if acting in a certain way leads to the wrong path, creates the wrong truth, how do we *know* when a way of acting will lead to the right path or even which is the right path? The point is that once we push these philosophical principles far enough we are faced most directly with the question: "What is knowledge, and how could we possibly have it given these principles?"

American Indian philosophy, as we have begun to see and will continue to see, is quite concerned with the questions asked. American Indian philosophy has a very different relationship to questions and question-formation than does its Western counterpart. It is generally thought by Native philosophers that questions are most often a sign of confusion and misunderstanding. The answer to a question often lies in the question itself rather than in some solution outside of the question. The problem a question addresses is typically one that is raised by the very question itself rather than some actual state of affairs. And yet, given what we have described above, nearly any Western philosopher will ask at least the following two questions: "How do you know which is right in the first place?" and "How can less knowledge be better?" This second question is partly a result of Western philosophy's incapacity to grasp the idea that certain things *should* not be known, and the first arises from Western philosophy's

so-called battle with skepticism. From the perspective of Western philosophy, it is generally thought that more knowledge is always better. (By Western philosophy here I merely mean mainstream Western philosophy, the tradition that led from Thales to modern Anglo-American analytic philosophy: the kind of philosophy that is usually called merely "philosophy," with no adjective. The point of this distinction is simply that there are a number of fringe-dwelling philosophers, never quite accepted by the mainstream, who should not be saddled with the previous charge.) Of course, Western philosophy has always had skeptics in one form or another who claim that certain things cannot be known, but there seems to be no way for a Western philosopher in this mainstream tradition to claim that things we *can* know we *should* not know. Even those who claim that there are things that we cannot know do not typically see this as positive. We must settle, they want to say, for this limited knowledge. But by saying this, they implicitly suppose that we ought to have more and thereby disallow the notion that there is some knowledge we *should* not have. Even the knowledge we cannot have, we ought to. Given this implicit supposition, it seems impossible to claim that knowledge we can have we ought not to. But in American Indian thought, and for that matter in many non-Western systems of thought, such an idea is not problematic. In these ways of thought, the assumption is not already in place that more knowledge is always better or that we ought always to have more of it. From the American Indian perspective, our knowledge is not limited since we have as much as we should.

In what follows, then, we will concern ourselves with making clear this notion of knowledge and how it relates to an understanding of the principles of American Indian philosophy. In doing so, Coyote and Thales will continue to be our tricksters, leading us by example from their mistakes to a right understanding of American Indian philosophy. However, we must note that an adequate understanding of the principles given so far further requires a detailed analysis of what might be called American Indian moral-metaphysics. Here we would examine the way in which we can understand the claim that the universe is itself moral and how we can understand relatedness as a moral concept. However, in this piece we will concern ourselves only with understanding the given principles via Native epistemology.

THE TRADITIONAL WESTERN APPROACH TO EPISTEMOLOGY

The Western form of knowledge is expressed in a formula. The one most used is: knowledge = justified, true belief. If knowledge amounts simply to this, then it becomes clear why it is impossible to claim that less knowledge is better. Why would anyone find it necessary to have less true and justified beliefs? However, in order to discover how this might be the case, we must go back further into the methodology that gives rise to the justified-true-belief formula of knowledge. The formula "knowledge = justified, true belief" does not by itself necessarily conflict with Native philosophy, other than perhaps the peculiarities of being a formula and what comes along with that. The conflict arises at a deeper level in what, ultimately, we want this to mean.

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In Western philosophy we call the study of knowledge "epistemology," which derives from the Greek *episteme*, knowledge, and *logos*, reason or account. This account purports to lay out the defining features of knowledge, the substantive conditions of knowledge, as well as the limits of knowledge. In large part, it is in these areas alone that the Western philosophical debate regarding knowledge arises: the analysis of knowledge, the source of knowledge (rationalism or empiricism), and the viability of skepticism. In this way, many issues regarding knowledge are generally left unquestioned. One such modern issue is the primacy of propositional knowledge.

Propositional knowledge is knowledge of the form "that something is so." It is the kind of knowledge that can be written down, that can be directly conveyed through statements or propositions. This kind of knowledge is thought to have permanence. If we make true and justified claims that something is so, those claims will continue to be true for eternity. In Western thought, this kind of knowledge is generally thought to be the pinnacle of philosophy.

Unlike in many non-Western schools of thought, in popular modern Anglo-American philosophy (which, as we have said, is for the most part what we mean by Western philosophy in this chapter), the idea that non-propositional knowledge is the more important, more basic, more fundamental form of knowledge has never been given much serious thought. There are those who in fact claim that all knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge. Here is the small and most likely inadequate list that philosophers in this tradition, who do not claim that all knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge, recognize as non-propositional knowledge: knowledge by direct awareness or acquaintance, and how-to knowledge or knowledge of how to do something. There may be still other forms or variations that have been overlooked in the monolithic focus on propositional knowledge. Whether or not this is so, it is clear that in Western philosophy, non-propositional knowledge, if it is accepted at all, plays little to no part in the work of philosophy.

Another aspect of traditional epistemology that has only recently become much of an issue arises from one of the three components of the traditional account of knowledge, and this is justification. It has seemed clear until quite recently to most epistemologists, with few exceptions, that justification requires foundations. To say this and then, by extension, that knowledge requires foundations is to say that justification requires: (1) that at least some beliefs be not only justified non-inferentially, that is, that they be justified not on the basis of other beliefs, but also (2) that they provide justification for those beliefs that cannot be justified non-inferentially, that is, those beliefs that without the beliefs in question would only be justified on the basis of other beliefs. Unless the first condition is met, there is no justification and no knowledge. If only the first condition is met and not the second, then our knowledge is very limited, limited to that of our own psychological states, for example. Part of the idea here is that for any belief x to count as knowledge, it must be justified. If it is justified by another belief y , then, in order for x to be justified, y must also be justified. We can quickly see that without something to stop this cycle, we will go on justifying infinitely. The foundationalist claim is, then, that for there to be knowledge there must be a z or set of z 's that is not justified by any other x and provides justification for y . Thus, in order for any