

THE REALIZATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY: NON-WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AS A COLONIAL INVENTION

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The goal of this essay is to facilitate the advancement of Native American Philosophy from potential to actualization (realization) on the model of other non-Western philosophies.

Background

'Chinese philosophy,' 'Indian philosophy,' 'African philosophy,' 'Native American philosophy' – any investigation of non-Western philosophy initiated within Western philosophy must be (can only be) a cross-cultural comparison. 'Philosophy' is an English word (or some related European derivative of the Greek) to which non-Western culture is compared – are certain portions of Chinese, Indian, African, Native American thought sufficiently similar to what we know and understand as Western philosophy to be called 'philosophy'? This is therefore basically a problem of translation, but what we might call 'deep translation,' where we are not just looking for equivalences (or near equivalences) among words of different languages for the same concept, but where it is not clear that there *is* a shared concept. What should we (Westerners) call (label) that portion of Chinese and Indian writing and that portion of African and Native American oral tradition? Should we call it (label it) 'history,' 'mythology,' 'religion,' 'poetry,' 'philosophy,' as these terms are typically defined within Western culture? Which of these Western terms, in other words, best describes these non-Western thought systems? Perhaps, strictly speaking, it is none of these; or maybe we should say it is all of them and none of them at the same time. But if we are speaking and writing in English or some other European language, we have to select one of our own words – so, we have to ask, which one is the best? Which type of Western discourse does it most closely resemble?

In principle this cross-cultural comparison could go either way – Europeans comparing non-Western thought systems to their own European systems, or non-Westerners comparing European thought systems to their own Chinese, Indian, African or Native American thought systems. We could imagine Confucian civil servants asking Marco Polo if his people had any 'zi' (as in *Kongzi* (Confucius), *Mengzi* (Mencius), *Laozi*, *Gaozi*, *Xunzi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi*, etc.) who had made Chinese culture so great. And Alexander the Great's soldiers might have been asked by Hindu scholars whether the Greeks had produced any *rishis* like those who had written the profound Indian Upanishads, or any darshanas like the *Nyaya* or the *Shamkya*. But because of the history of European military, scientific and economic domination of the world since the 17th century, it has been primarily Europeans who initiated the discussion using their intellectual framework to analyze and judge non-Western thought systems. As a result, while the non-Western thought systems are themselves ancient (at least as old as Western thought systems), their packaging as 'philosophy' (using that word or its equivalent in some other European language, including Latin) is late 17th and early 18th century for literate Chinese and Indian philosophy (although not coming into widespread usage in Europe for another hundred years), and 1930-40 for non-literate African and Native American philosophy. On the other hand, the first recognition by non-Westerners, that part of their thought system should be classified by the term which they had come to use to translate Western 'philosophy' (*zhe xue* in Chinese and *darshana* in India) was around 1920 for literate Chinese and Indian and 1950 for non-literate African and Native American.

As colonial masters desirous of control, Europeans wanted to know how the colonized

peoples think, what were their basic assumptions, presuppositions, life goals, values, norms, etc., knowledge of which, it was thought, would greatly aid colonial administration. Informed by an essentialist, and perhaps racist or at least racialist, division of the world population into distinct groups, the assumption was that Indians look at the world in a unique way which is different from that of the Chinese who see the world in a different way from the Africans who see things very differently from Native Americans who view the world differently from Europeans whose outlook is different from all the others.

Since philosophy was widely perceived after 1920 as reflecting the deepest outlook, world view or *weltanschauung* of a people, it therefore seemed natural to think of an Indian philosophy expressing the world view of the Indians, a Chinese philosophy expressing the world view of Chinese, and so for Africans and Native Americans. On the other hand, as Western-educated non-Westerners joined the discussion, they used this same colonial construction for their own political purposes, to create a positive, honorific image of national cultural unity with which to offset negative, pejorative colonial perceptions of their overall inferiority. Granted colonized peoples were not as scientifically, technologically advanced, they nonetheless could claim impressive though more passive, pacific, emotive, holistic and aesthetic philosophies of their own.

Non-Western philosophy is generally contrasted, either negatively or positively, in other words, with the cerebral, analytic, scientific orientation of the 'West.' Negritude is probably the most familiar example – where European colonial masters had disparaged Africans as emotional and childlike, Senghor and others praised Africans for being more emotionally sensitive and close to their bodies. But far from establishing differences between Western and non-Western thought systems, this merely projects onto non-Western cultures ancient Western dichotomies (binaries) of reason and emotion, science and poetry, logical and romantic, analytic and holistic, rational and intuitive, etc., in which non-Western cultures are either idealized or stigmatized as sources of a more holistic, poetic, emotional, romantic, and intuitive vision of the world. Depending on how that schism is viewed within Western culture, non-Western peoples are typically viewed either negatively as primitive, backward, underdeveloped, or positively as a welcomed emotional and holistic antidote for the overly cerebral, logocentric West (where icemen can't jump, much less create music and dance).

As a result, non-Western peoples have constructed very unified histories of their philosophy, privileging their favorite (and generally later) thinkers, around which earlier and divergent thinkers are marginally arranged (Chinese philosophers privileging 11th century Song dynasty 'neo-Confucianist' philosophers, such as Zhu Xi, and Indian philosophers privileging Shankara's

8th century advaita version of Vedanta), whereas Westerns generally construct a very different picture of the history of these philosophies, privileging the more varied and argumentative thinkers of a much earlier period (Xunzi, Mozi, Hui Shih, Gong-sun Lung among Chinese thinkers and the Carvacans, the Shamkya philosophers, and Ramanuja among Indian thinkers) which tended to be marginalized by the early 20th century creation of Chinese and Indian canons of unifying, essentialist, national philosophies.

Thus, by 1920 there is a fairly widespread view that among literate cultures there are three original sources of philosophy, all arising at about the same time, viz. 600 BCE – an Indian philosophy reflecting the world view and values of the Indian people, a Chinese philosophy reflecting the world view and values of the Chinese people, and a Greek philosophy

reflecting the world view and values of the European people. And by 1950 there was a widespread recognition (though not so well established as in the case of Indian and Chinese philosophy) that certain portions of the oral traditions of these non-literate peoples could also be viewed (packaged, classified) as 'philosophy.'

In all these cases non-Western philosophy is not only *called* 'philosophy,' but translated into the style, language, and terminology of Western philosophy – Mozi becoming a 'utilitarian' philosophy; Shankara a 'Hegelian' one; Yogacara Buddhists treated as 'idealists'; the Carvacans becoming radical 'empiricists,' 'hedonists' and 'materialists'; the African Bantu are said to have a dynamic, Bergsonian 'ontology,' and so on. The original thought is, of course, non-Western, but its emergence as 'philosophy' is a Western invention.

What was the point of this 'invention,' whose interests did it serve? For the colonial masters it was a device for political control; for the colonized it became a defense against the ubiquitous charge of cultural inferiority. But if this is so, then we must ask what use does it have now in a postcolonial world? Unless there is some other postcolonial use, will non-Western philosophy survive the end of colonialism? Where do we go from here? In the case of literate non-Western philosophies, the question is, is there enough contemporary philosophical interest among Indians and Chinese to sustain these non-Western philosophies into the 21st century? In the case of non-literate non-Western philosophies, the question is whether there is enough interest to sustain the attempt to continue the Western construction and invention of these non-Western philosophies.

Of special interest in this last regard concerns the possibility of a Native American philosophy which could be cross-culturally compared to and constructed (invented) within the broad frame work of Western philosophy. If we compare the case of Native American and African philosophy we find a curious difference – African philosophy has advanced much further into mainstream international philosophy (on the model of Western philosophy) since the 1950s than has Native American philosophy. And we need to ask why, and what more would be required to promote the cause of Native American philosophy – and also whether such a Western intervention is at all desirable and why.

In the case of African philosophy we can clearly detect the step-by-step historical evolution of the acceptance of this non-literate non-Western thought system into mainstream Western philosophical discussions. Assuming a parallel between African philosophy and Native American philosophy (as non-literate), let us consider how one might advance Native American philosophy to the next stage of its recognition within and entrance into mainstream philosophy (and whether this is a desirable objective).

In the case of non-literate thought systems, such as that of pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, the Western construction of non-Western philosophy typically goes through several distinct states. First, European philosophers try to summarize the overall world view of the non-Western culture in question (an anthropology-like discussion, though framed in Western philosophical language, often called 'ethnophilosophy' – in the case of African philosophy this would include Placide Tempels and Lucien Lévy-Brühl, 1930-50). This is generally followed by an attempt by European anthropologists to interview and record an unusually well-informed shaman of that non-literate culture (as Marcel Griaule did Ogotemeli of the Dogon of Mali, West Africa). This in turn is routinely followed by a lively and often heated discussion among the Western-educated 'professional philosophy' elite of the non-Western

and previously non-literate culture (e.g. Kwasi Wiredu and Paulin Hountondji, in the case of Africa, 1960-80). And out of this emerges finally a new philosophical reflection by philosophically trained members of the non-Western culture on their own cultural assumptions and intuitions (resulting in the flourishing of recent books written by Western-educated African philosophers on African philosophy – Segun Gbadegesin, D. A. Masolo, Kwame Gyekye, among others, 1980-present) which has now successfully entered the mainstream of Western, and especially American philosophy – that is, taught in American universities (in courses called 'African Philosophy'), regularly presented at the American Philosophical Association meetings, discussed in professional philosophical journals (including but not limited to journals specifically devoted to issues in African philosophy), studied by philosophy majors and graduate students, etc.

But, again, assuming a parallel between African philosophy and Native American philosophy, we can see that of the above stages, the discussion of Native American philosophy has got only as far as the second stage – at the first stage 'ethnophilosophers' have attempted to describe the world view (attitudes, values, etc.) of various Native American groups in Western philosophical terms (the work of Richard Brandt and John Ladd arguably parallels that of Tempels and Levy-Bruhl in the case of African philosophy), while at the second stage Neilhardt's recorded interview with Black Elk in the 1930s parallels Griaule's interview with Ogotemeli. But for various reasons all philosophical progress seems to have stopped at this point in the mid-1950s.

If this process is to continue, it must involve Western-educated, philosophically-trained Native Americans entering the discussion (parallel to the work of Wiredu and Hountondji in African philosophy, and, at a still later stage, Gbadegesin, Masolo and Gyekye). In the long term the following steps would need to be taken. Encouraging Native Americans to study philosophy and to critique the attempts of ethnophilosophers (Brandt and Ladd), as well as anthropological attempts like that of Neilhardt's interview with Black Elk. Then selecting among this group the brightest to go on for graduate study, and finally encouraging a lively debate among philosophically-trained Native Americans on the possibility and desirability of such a colonial reconstruction of their traditional ways of thought into a new 'Native American philosophy' – leading finally to new works written by these Native American philosophers reflecting on, as mainstream Western philosophers typically do, their own intuitions and cultural background assumptions, institutions, etc., entering finally the mainstream philosophical community (as have the most recent works of African philosophers such as Gbadegesin, Masolo, and Gyekye). The test of the success of this program would therefore be a stream of books by trained Native American philosophers, courses offered in philosophy departments of American universities called 'Native American philosophy,' articles in professional philosophy journals devoted to issues of Native American philosophy, and so on.

Now to the hard question: is this a desirable goal? What are the pros and cons? Very generally, on the negative side, Native Americans would give up their traditional ways of thought to an alien Western mode of expression and articulation, allowing their indigenous thought to be absorbed by Western modes of thought, expression, and argumentation; on the positive side, Western philosophy would be able to absorb and incorporate another branch of non-Western philosophy in which Western philosophers would be able to understand at least that part of Native American thought which could be successfully translated into Western philosophical terms and to be able to interact with Western-trained

Native American philosophers. Who gains in this process? Native Americans give up the most, although they do gain the opportunity (if they want this and find it desirable) to engage in a philosophical discussion with non-Native Americans and to have their ideas communicated beyond their tribal and ethnic boundaries; Western philosophy, and Western culture more generally, gain the most and give up the least. Who decides whether this is to take place? Although Native Americans must freely cooperate if the project is to succeed, nonetheless, it is the majority Western culture which must initiate and sponsor and pay for such an undertaking (at the moment there is certainly no spontaneous demand on the part of Native Americans for such a project, and why should they want to have their thought – in some cases ethnically and religiously unique and precious to them – translated into some alien mode, to be taken over by foreigners?). Since the power relations between modern Western and Native American cultures are still very one-sided on the Western side, I think it is fair to call this, as it is fair to label all constructions of non-Western philosophy, a 'colonial invention' – and it is this project which I wish to initiate (or rather continue to final realization).

Methodology

To facilitate this project, individuals and institutions already identified with 'Native American philosophy' or 'Native American thought' (themselves mainly Native American) must be informed of this plan for developing Native American philosophy as part of mainstream American and European philosophy as outlined in the "Background" above, eliciting critical responses. Then their responses should be collected in a printed, or internet form to be shared among themselves, as well the larger philosophical community (through the American Philosophical Association, of which I am a member), again, inviting critical responses. And finally from this wider circle of responses a final edited version should be drawn up – including a brief introduction explaining the plan, how the materials were collected, samples of respondents comments, and those of the larger philosophical community (and Native American philosophical responses to that), and a conclusion – altogether representing an initial dialogue toward the eventual construction by philosophically trained Native Americans of a philosophically recognizable Native American philosophy. Hopefully, this would provide the 'take off' point for a new recognized category within philosophical circles of Native American philosophy.

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