



Truth and Native American epistemology¹

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1.

Two stories about Native American epistemology: one (Jim's) by a white Euro-American, the other (Lee's) by a Choctaw Native American. Lee's story, though written to some extent in a language and style of Euro-American philosophy and foregoing many traditional teaching techniques, comes from a Native American world and—although he rightly states in his story that 'I [Lee] do not and cannot claim any special authority on these issues, I am neither a medicine-man nor an elder' (a statement that does not represent false humility, as we shall see)—there is the authority of one who speaks from a Native American world—no footnotes!—as contrasted with the lack of that authority in my story, which merely peeks into Native American worlds, gleaning small understandings as best I can.² For this reason, Lee's story follows—and indirectly comments on—mine.

The question 'How important is truth to knowledge and epistemology?'—the question posed in the call for papers for this issue of *Social Epistemology*—has been a central concern in my work in environmental ethics and Native American philosophy. My reflections on this and related questions came to a focus in my work on the linked notions of 'ceremonial worlds' and narrative, which I began to think about while listening to indigenous people in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory in 1995 and in Thunder Bay, Ontario while working with the Native Philosophy Project during 1996–1997 (see Cheney and Weston, 1999). Ceremonial worlds are the worlds (or stories) within which we live, the worlds (myths, if you like) that have the power to orient us in life. They define for us the nature of the sacred (that in which meaning is located, the more-than-human dimensions of our worlds), the natural and the human, and the relationships between them.³ A starting place for me in developing the notion of a ceremonial world was Louise Profeit-LeBlanc's explication of the Northern Tutchone term *łi an oh* in response to a question posed to her concerning whether the stories she used in her work with at risk children were 'true'. In response, she used the term *łi an oh* (usually glossed as 'what they say, it's true') and defined it as meaning 'correctly true', 'responsibly true' (a 'responsible truth'), 'true to what you believe in', 'what is good for you and the community' and 'rings true for everybody's well-being'.⁴ Aside from the question of whether there is a concept of truth *simpliciter* in Northern Tutchone or only the concept of a *responsible* truth (and, presumably, its correlate: the concept of an irresponsible truth), *łi an oh* does at least

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suggest a way of stepping beyond the 'defeat and confusion' Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin argue is built into the notions of truth and knowledge in contemporary Western philosophy.⁵

Making use of J. L. Austin's notion of the performative function of language, a ceremonial world (in the fullest sense of the term) is an actively constructed portrait of the world intended to be responsibly true, one which rings true for everybody's well-being. It is a world built on the basis of an ethical-epistemological orientation of attentiveness (or, as Native Americans tend to put it, *respect*) rather than an epistemology of control. Such ceremonial worlds, built, as they are, around the notion of responsible truth, are not developed piecemeal, but are synthetic creations, adjusted holistically to all the concerns that arise from a focus on responsible truth: they must tie down to the world of everyday practise and experience in a way that makes it possible to survive; they must orient the community and its individuals on roads of life that allow for the flourishing of all members of the community as far as that is possible. The metaphysics or ontology of such a world will not be understood as *true* in the modern sense of the term. The issue is always (if implicitly) whether it is responsibly, or correctly, true; is it action guiding in the full sense just delineated?

In this full sense of the term, ceremonial worlds exist, so far as my experience goes, only in indigenous cultures. All of us live within ceremonial worlds in some sense, however, though nonindigenous ceremonial worlds tend to be diminished worlds. The ceremonial worlds of the West, for example, are diminished in the sense that they are not intended to be responsibly true worlds, ones that ring true for everybody's well-being. Nor are they worlds built on the basis of an ethical-epistemological orientation of attentiveness (*respect*). Rather, these worlds pretend to be value-neutral 'true' accounts of how the world really is. The so-called value-neutral project of building a 'true' account of the way the world is is severed from the project of creating a world in which humans can and do flourish. Moreover, these worlds tend to be built in accordance with epistemologies of domination and control; and it is within these worlds that we propose ethical theories and projects to *counter* domination and control. This peculiar and unfortunate situation arises because we do not see that our world-building projects are themselves founded (though implicitly) on epistemological foundations that all but guarantee that the explicitly ethical projects we set ourselves within these worlds will fail.

In a series of articles,⁶ Vine Deloria, Jr has given us a portrait of epistemological relationships within the world of the 'old Indians, people who had known the life of freedom before they were confined to the reservations and subjected to Western religious and educational systems' that resonates remarkably with the notion of ceremonial worlds and takes it a significant step further.

'The real interest of the old Indians', Deloria says, 'was not to find the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person's life, individuals were supposed to walk' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 46). This is key to understanding Native American epistemology: It is ethically informed;⁷ any 'truths' that emerge in Native American worlds are 'responsible truths', in Louise Profeit-LeBlanc's sense of the term. 'Lacking a spiritual, social, or political dimension [in their scientific practise]', Deloria says, 'it is difficult to understand why Western peoples believe they are so clever. Any damn fool can treat a living thing as if it were a machine and establish conditions under which it is required to perform certain functions—all that is required is a sufficient application of brute force. The result of brute force is slavery' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 13). 'Science *forces* secrets from

nature by experimentation, and the results of the experiments are thought to be knowledge. The traditional peoples *accepted* secrets from the rest of creation' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 135). Lacking an ethical dimension, the epistemology of Western scientific method produces something that can be called 'knowledge' only in an attenuated sense: 'We may elicit and force secrets from nature, but it is only answering the specific questions we ask it. It is not giving us the whole story as it would if it were specifically involved in the communication of knowledge' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 136).

Another, related, key to understanding Native American epistemology is its attitude with respect to anomalies—data or experiences that do not seem to fit into the patterns that have so far emerged in one's observations of nature.

Within the life history of maturity one can be said to travel from information to knowledge to wisdom. Organisms gather information, and as the cumulative amount begins to achieve a critical mass, patterns of interpretation and explanation begin to appear—even thoughts seem to form themselves into societies at a certain level of complexity. Here it is that Western science prematurely derives its scientific 'laws' and assumes that the products of its own mind are inherent in the structure of the universe. But American Indians allow the process to continue, recognizing that premature analysis will produce anomalies and give incomplete understanding. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 14)

At the point where 'patterns of interpretation and explanation' begin to emerge, the epistemological methods of Western science and Native American epistemological methods part ways. As Lee's story puts it, in Western science (and philosophy) *belief* enters the picture ('Western science prematurely derives its scientific "laws" and assumes that the products of its own mind are inherent in the structure of the universe') and the map is taken as a *true* account of the territory; the map is mistaken for the territory. For the Native American, both the map and the territory are real, but the map is not (is not understood as a true picture of) the territory. The Western understanding of 'true belief' is absent in Native American epistemology. As Deloria puts it in another context, 'it is important to note that [Indians] are dealing with recognitions, not beliefs that have an intellectual content; and recognitions, like perceptions, involve the totality of personality' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 362). Native Americans do not get stuck as Western thought does: 'An old chief of the Crow tribe from Montana was asked to describe the difference between his tribe and the whites who lived nearby. Pausing slightly and drawing his conclusions, he remarked that the white man has ideas [beliefs], the Indian has visions' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 15). Beliefs concern the map and mistake it for the territory; *visions* are integrating experiences at the core of ceremonial worlds that orient Native Americans culturally, spiritually, psychologically, politically, and in matters of subsistence and use of technology. 'Because Western science concentrates so heavily on information and theory, its product is youth, not maturity' (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 15). There is a continuity in the maturation of Native American understanding from information to knowledge to maturity.

Traditional people preserve the whole vision, whereas scientists generally reduce the experience to its alleged constituent parts and inherent principles ... Science leaves anomalies, whereas the unexplained in traditional technology is held as a mystery, accepted, revered, but not discarded as useless. Science operates in fits and starts because the anomalies of one generation often become the orthodoxy of the next generation. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 135).

The Indian understands dreams, visions, and interspecies communications, when they are available, as a natural part of human experience ... [T]he task is to make sense of the experience or withhold judgment on its meaning until a sufficient number of similar experiences reveal the pattern of meaning that is occurring ... Wisdom ... increases with age. As a person gets older he or she is

able to remember and understand a wide variety of events or activities that are species-, location-, and time-specific. Instead of matching generalizations with new phenomena, Indians match a more specific body of information with the immediate event or experience. Exceptions to the rule become a new set of specific behaviors that open new classifications for future information. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 67–68)

It is time to join the two keys to Native American epistemology so far discussed: the methodological points just made and the earlier point that this methodology is *ethically* informed. ‘The old Indians’, Deloria says,

were interested in finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk. All knowledge, if it is to be useful, was directed toward that goal. Absent in this approach was the idea that knowledge existed apart from human beings and their communities, and could stand alone for "its own sake." In the Indian conception, it was impossible that there could be abstract propositions that could be used to explore the structure of the physical world. Knowledge was derived from individual and communal experiences in daily life, in keen observation of the environment and in interpretive messages that they received from spirits in ceremonies, visions, and dreams. In formulating their understanding of the world, Indians did not discard any experience. Everything had to be included in the spectrum of knowledge and related to what was already known. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 43–44)

To use a phrase of Deloria’s, we might call the idea that ‘In formulating their understanding of the world, Indians did not discard any experience. Everything had to be included in the spectrum of knowledge and related to what was already known’ a ‘principle of epistemological method’. Another principle of epistemological method appears, Deloria says, at the end of Black Elk’s telling of how the Sioux received the sacred pipe from White Buffalo Calf Woman and how she taught the people to communicate with the higher powers through the use of the pipe in ceremonies: ‘This they tell’, Black Elk said, ‘and whether it happened so or not, I do not know; but if you think about it, you can see that it is true’. Deloria explicitly calls this statement ‘a principle of epistemological method’ (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 44). The idea here is more complex than the first principle. As I read it, this second principle points to two ideas: that the account of Buffalo Calf Woman is not necessarily to be understood in literalist, historical terms; the account is to be understood as a depiction of one element of the ceremonial world within which the Oglala Lakota live⁹ and that we must always consider (over the course of our entire lives) the ways (often multiple) that a particular story or experience might instruct us; stories and experience are to be understood as having often inexhaustible depth. A third principle of epistemological principle (not explicitly stated as such) is that ‘Everything that humans experience has value and instructs us in some aspect of life’ (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 45).¹⁰

These three, closely-related principles might be contrasted with a more critical epistemological method that focuses on refutation and critical objection as the way to truth. In this epistemological style, for example, one might object that the second principle would certainly lead one astray and that the third principle is simply false (or, at least, has not been shown to be true). It should be noted, however, that to shift the burden of proof in this way does not so much *advance* the cause of ‘truth’ as it shuts down modes of reflecting on experience and stories that may very well lead to insight and knowledge and to ‘responsible truth’. The point is similar to one Anthony Weston makes concerning Tom Birch’s principle of universal consideration in environmental ethics. Birch says that his principle demands that all things ‘be taken as valuable, even though we may not yet know how or why, until they are

proved otherwise' (Birch, 1993, p. 328). Weston comments: 'Actually, even more deeply, universal consideration requires us not merely to extend this kind of benefit of the doubt but actively to take up the case, so to speak, for beings so far excluded or devalued'. Weston then adds, precisely in line with the Native American view that at the heart of one's epistemological relation to the world there must be moral purpose, that 'ethics [a basic etiquette] is primary: ethics opens the way to knowledge, epistemology is value-driven, not vice versa' (Cheney and Weston, 1999, p. 120). Or, as Deloria himself puts it:

In an epistemological sense, there is no question that the tribal method of gathering information is more sophisticated and certainly more comprehensive than Western science. In most tribal traditions, no data are discarded as unimportant or irrelevant. Indians consider their own individual experiences, the accumulated wisdom of the community that has been gathered by previous generations, their dreams, visions, and prophecies, and any information received from birds, animals, and plants as data that must be arranged, evaluated, and understood as a unified body of knowledge. This mixture of data from sources that the Western scientific world regards as highly unreliable and suspect produces a consistent perspective on the natural world. It is seen by tribal peoples as having wide application. Knowledge about plants and birds can form the basis of ethics, government, and economics as well as provide a means of mapping a large area of land. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 66–67)

This epistemological style of openness contrasts with the focus on extracting very specific pieces of information, understood within an equally specific set of concepts, that characterizes the controlled experiment of modern science. Deloria in fact contrasts Native American epistemology with Thomas Kuhn's understanding of science as proceeding within paradigms and as being therefore highly selective both in its attention to data and the problems on which it chooses to focus.

Native American epistemological style, as depicted by Deloria, is even more radical than I have so far indicated. The principles of epistemological method so far mentioned are at least straightforwardly epistemological. But Deloria goes further. Many statements coming from Native American worlds that non-Native Americans would understand to be statements of *belief* (truth claims) concerning Native American world views are best understood as principles of epistemological method of a rather different sort than those so far mentioned. Consider, for example, Deloria's portrait of the universe as a moral universe:

The real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person's life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe. That is to say, there is a proper way to live in the universe: There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief. The sum total of our life experiences has a reality. There is a direction to the universe, empirically exemplified in the physical growth cycles of childhood, youth, and old age, with the corresponding responsibility of every entity to enjoy life, fulfill itself, and increase in wisdom and the spiritual development of personality. Nothing has incidental meaning and there are no coincidences . . . In the moral universe all activities, events, and entities are related, and consequently it does not matter what kind of existence an entity enjoys, for the responsibility is always there for it to participate in the continuing creation of reality. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 46)

These attributes of the moral universe have the same status as the three epistemological principles discussed above. That is, in relationship to the goal of finding the proper road upon which to walk, Native Americans paint a portrait of a moral universe that invites its own fulfillment (see Cheney and Weston, 1999, p. 125–129), they create a ceremonial world that gives direction to the quest for moral understanding and support for living in

accordance with that moral understanding. The characteristics of the moral life are not deduced from, or suggested by, a prior, value-neutral account of the structure of the universe or ‘metaphysics of morals’; rather, once again, ‘ethics opens the way to knowledge, epistemology is value-driven, not vice versa’. This portrait of a moral universe is not properly understood as a set of false (or at least unproven) beliefs or assumptions. Such a view, in the words of Leroy Meyer and Tony Ramirez (Lakota), puts ‘too much stock in the word “philosophy”’. As Deloria’s account shows, to continue Meyer’s and Ramirez’s thought, ‘there are alternative ways of intelligently engaging the world. To construe one’s thinking in terms of belief is characteristic of a particular kind of world view’ and indigenous peoples do not seem to ‘conceive of experience in such an overtly intellectualized manner’ (Meyer and Ramirez, 1996, p. 104).¹¹ Ceremonial worlds place communication and reciprocity with natural environments—rather than the desire to dominate those environments or to establish ‘truth claims’ about them—at the very heart of the production of knowledge and wisdom. Ethical maturity rather than true belief is the goal.

Native American thought on the notion that the universe is alive is truly remarkable. ‘It cannot be argued’, Deloria says, ‘that the universe is moral or has a moral purpose without simultaneously maintaining that the universe is alive. The old Indians had no problem with this concept because they experienced life in everything, and there was no reason to suppose that the continuum of life was not universal’ (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 49). Is this a scientific claim with supporting experiential evidence? A metaphysical world view? Not likely in view of our discussion to this point. But Native American thinking concerning what they think of as a living planet is more revealing:

The practical criterion that is always cited to demonstrate its validity is the easily observable fact that the earth nurtures smaller forms of life—people, plants, birds, animals, rivers, valleys, and continents. For Indians, both speculation and analogy end at this point. To go further and attribute a plenitude of familiar human characteristics to the earth is unwarranted. It would cast the planet in the restricted clothing of lesser beings, and we would not be able to gain insights and knowledge about the real essence of the earth. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 49–50)

If speculation and analogy end where Native Americans end it, then the idea of the living earth is not even speculative: it is obvious on the face of it. Not that it cannot be denied, but at that point speculation, theory construction or metaphysics is necessary. The last two sentences in the quotation put another twist on the matter: They fold the idea of the living earth into a ceremonial world orienting Native Americans on the moral road. The notion of a living world is not part of a Native American world view—a truth claim—it is an everyday observation fitted into a ceremonial world in a way that enhances its epistemological effectiveness. That is, by casting humans as lesser beings in relation to the living earth, we more effectively ‘gain insights and knowledge about the real essence of the earth’: ‘Coming last, human beings were the “younger brothers” of the other life-forms and therefore had to learn everything from these creatures. Thus human activities resembled bird and animal behaviour in many ways and brought the unity of conscious life to an objective focus’ (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 50).

The notion of a living universe, therefore, is not merely obvious on the face of it, but it also provides epistemological direction in the search for knowledge (as just stated) as well as powerful moral direction. The epistemological direction is itself ethically informed, as we have seen. There is more:

The living universe requires mutual respect among its members, and this suggests that a strong sense of individual identity and self is a dominant characteristic of the world as we know it. The willingness of entities to allow others to fulfill themselves, and the refusal of any entity to intrude thoughtlessly on another, must be the operative principle of this universe. Consequently, self-knowledge and self-discipline are high values of behavior Respect . . . involves two attitudes. One attitude is the acceptance of self-discipline by humans and their communities to act responsibly toward other forms of life. The other attitude is to seek to establish communications and covenants with other forms of life on a mutually agreeable basis. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 50–51)

These conclusions are not forced upon us by the notion of a living universe, of course, but they are the sorts of conclusions one might expect within a ceremonial world built around the moral purpose of ‘finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk’. They extend in quite natural ways the general attitude of universal consideration discussed earlier as a feature of Native American worlds.

The principles of epistemological method discussed thus far are perhaps summed up—or unified, rather—in the well-known phrase ‘All my relatives’,

which is used as an opening invocation and closing benediction for ceremonies. ‘All my relatives’ . . . also has a secular purpose, which is to remind us of our responsibility to respect life and to fulfill our covenantal duties. But few people understand that the phrase also describes the epistemology of the Indian worldview, providing the methodological basis for the gathering of information about the world. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 52)

‘We are all relatives’ when taken as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge means that we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it . . . and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world *as we experience it*. This concept is simply the relativity concept as applied to a universe that people experience as alive and not as dead or inert. Thus Indians knew that stones were the perfect beings because they were self-contained entities that had resolved their social relationships and possessed great knowledge about how every other entity, and every species, should live. Stones had mobility but did not need to use it. Every other being had mobility and needed, in some specific manner, to use it in relationships. (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 34; emphasis added)

We can see from these passages that the line between principles of epistemological method and ceremonial worlds is rather arbitrary: these principles could be said to (at least partially) constitute the epistemological dimension of ceremonial worlds.

We can also see, by this time, that when Deloria says that by employing various principles of epistemological method we ‘gain insights and knowledge about the real essence of the earth’ (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 50) he is not speaking of deep *truths* about the world; rather, he is speaking of a deeply practical map of the world (a ceremonial world): ‘Reality for tribal peoples, as opposed to the reality sought by Western scientists, was the experience of the moment coupled with the interpretive scheme that had been woven together over the generations’ (Deloria *et al.*, 1999, p. 38–39).

The central value that informs Deloria’s principles of epistemological method is that of ‘adaptive fit’—finding the proper road upon which human beings should walk—rather than domination and control. Oriented to the natural world by a set of what non-Native Americans would think of as (probably false) beliefs about the world, but which are better understood as a set of (powerful) epistemological guidelines, those who adopt these guidelines become remarkably attuned to what the world *tells* them about human adaptive fit in the larger, more-than-human community. Knowledge shaped by indigenous principles of epistemological method guarantee that knowledge is the result of deep and continuous communication between humans and the more-than-human world of which they are citizens. Epistemologies shaped by values of

domination and control of nature virtually guarantee that the resulting ‘knowledge’—certainly not wisdom—is a human monologue that structures its understanding of the world around human order and purpose. The world is not permitted to speak on its own behalf. It merely answers questions posed by human culture and answers these questions, not in its own voice, but in a vocabulary, and according to an agenda, not its own. In Francis Bacon’s graphic imagery, nature is put on the rack and forced to confess. Native American epistemology, by contrast, is marked by respect. To repeat:

Respect . . . involves two attitudes. One attitude is the acceptance of self-discipline by humans and their communities to act responsibly toward other forms of life. The other attitude is to seek to establish communications and covenants with other forms of life on a mutually agreeable basis.¹²

2.

Halito. Chim achukma? Sa-hoschifo-ut Lee Hester. *Chatah sia hoke!* Which is to say ‘Hello. How are you? My name is Lee Hester. I am a citizen of the Choctaw Nation’. I begin my talks in this way to help emphasize the differences between Native American people and others living in North America. This greeting directly exemplifies differences in language and allegiance. To those that know the law, it points toward differences in legal status and the fact that there are laws that pertain only to American Indians. To everyone, it should point toward the deeper differences in culture and with some study, it perhaps hints at basic differences in world view, or what might from a native perspective be termed ‘presence-in-the-world’. I do not and cannot claim any special authority on these issues, I am neither a medicine-man nor an elder. However, I am an enrolled member by blood, I prefer the term ‘citizen’, of an Indian Nation; I grew up in Oklahoma—which in the Choctaw language means ‘Red People’—among Indian people, including my own relatives; my main associations are with Native American people. That, combined with a small amount of western philosophical training, may enable me to provide some observations—hopefully presented in a way which makes them meaningful.

The topic ‘Truth and Native American Epistemology’ is a grand one. One which I undoubtedly do not have all the ‘answers’ to, and maybe don’t have any answers to. As I said, I will mainly present some observations, though my Euro-American philosophical training will drive me to some deductions based on the observations. Throughout this paper, I will use terms like ‘Native American’ or ‘Indian’ as if my conclusions are readily applicable to the peoples of all the sovereign Indian Nations. This is not necessarily true, though I do think there are many similarities from nation to nation. As Viola Cordova has said, any Native American has more in common with any other Native American than with any non-Indian. A short story will serve as a jumping of point for the rest of the talk. I have used this story elsewhere, so I hope I do not bore those of you that have heard it before.

A few years ago I was the professor of a course called ‘Native American Identity’. I won’t say I was ‘teaching it’ for many reasons. One of them is that I tried, as much as possible, to use members of the Native American community—particularly elders—as the real teachers. I like to think it is because I recognize that they are the ones who can truly teach it, not just that I am lazy.

One of our speakers was John Proctor, the oldest living Creek medicine man. He is the uncle of Wanda Davis, a good friend of mine—so I was able to persuade him to

spend a three hour session with the class one evening. Mr Proctor is a key practitioner of the traditional Creek religion. He is the medicine man for a stomp ground. 'Stomp ground' is the name given to the ceremonial grounds where the Creek practise their religion.

Mostly the students asked the kinds of questions you might expect. Since they thought of Mr. Proctor as a representative of a traditional religion, they asked him cosmogonic or cosmological questions. I was surprised when one of the students asked the ultimate question ... Remember—this was a class on 'Indian Identity'. The student asked, 'What makes you Creek?'

Those of you familiar with the Native American traditions, or those that have attended one of my talks before, would expect the answer to be a rambling narrative that might *seem* not to be an answer at all. This is just what I expected. I settled back in my chair in preparation for Mr. Proctor's answer. Without hesitation he said, 'If you come to the stomp ground for four years, take the medicines and dance the dances, then you are Creek'. The answer was completely unexpected and thus even more forcefully illuminating. Mr Proctor had listed a set of *practices* which made someone Creek, or more properly in context, a member of the traditional Creek religion.

If you asked a member of just about any *Christian* religion what made them Christians, you would get a completely different answer. My Missionary Baptist relatives would tell you that to be Christian you have to 'Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour'. Acceptance, faith—belief is at the core of Christian religion and not surprisingly at the core of Euro-American philosophy. Just think about how you would characterize different philosophical schools, or different figures in the Euro-American philosophical tradition. This school believed this ... the central tenets of that school were ... this famed philosopher thought that ... Beliefs, beliefs, beliefs.

Indeed, in the Euro-American philosophical tradition, it is unclear how one would go about doing epistemology at all without belief. The nature of justification, defeasibility, facticity, truth and a multitude of other issues are up for grabs in epistemology, but there is one thing that is usually not questioned. Whatever knowledge may be, it would seem that it at least has to be a belief.

In the Euro-American philosophical tradition, the centrality of belief is clear. Though we may analyse what we are doing at great length, think up different ways of characterizing it, we go about asserting different views of 'the way things are'. These are generally expressed as propositions. To the extent that we buy into them, we 'believe' them. Sometimes, at least according to some epistemologists, we not only believe them but actually 'know' them.

John Proctor's answer points to a different way and the more I review my experiences in the Native American community the more I think that his answer is illuminating. It has helped me understand an interesting experience that I had while 'teaching' in Canada. Here I put the word 'teaching' in scare quotes, because I was more nearly learning than teaching. While in Canada I taught several classes, including an intro philosophy class attended by Daniel BigGeorge, an Anishnabe who was a member of the Northern Wind drum group and a practitioner of some of the traditional religion. Daniel and I had several interesting encounters, but there was one that is particularly important to this talk.

Daniel came to me one day after class with a very serious demeanor. Generally he laughed and joked as is common among Native American people, but it was clear this time he had something important to say. He talked about the shaking tent

ceremony and other ceremonies that a Euro-American might consider 'superstitious'. He ended by asking me if I believed in these ceremonies. I considered the question very carefully. Just what was my view? I have been trained in the Euro-American philosophical tradition, I have taught symbolic logic and other technical classes that are at the core of Western philosophy. Did I really 'believe' in the shaking tent?

I told Daniel that I could not say that I either believed or disbelieved in them. I have seen and experienced things that I do not comprehend in various traditional ceremonies. They are just part of my experience. I know my experiences, but I can't say what I experienced. He explained that he too did not 'believe' in them, though it was clear from what he said that he also did not 'disbelieve' in them. This was one of a couple of turning points in my relation to Daniel. Shortly after this exchange he invited me to come to a traditional ceremony welcoming the bears back after their winter hibernation. As a member of the Bear Clan, this was an important ceremony for Daniel. I was honoured to be invited. It was a great experience, one which I shall always cherish.

Now, I think that our discussion, among other things, may have been a test. As a mixed-blood I am often tested. In fact, at least one Western philosopher has suggested on the basis of how I look that I'm not a 'real' Indian. In the Indian community, the tests are a lot more subtle. If I had answered that I believed, then was I gullible, patronizing or trying to play 'real' Indian? The answer was bit more clear and just as negative if I answered that I disbelieved.

The way in which most ceremonies are approached also points to a form of what we might call non-belief. There is always an interesting mixture of reverence and irreverence in Indian ceremonies. Just about the time that things seem most serious, someone will usually crack a joke. Often it will be the very medicine-man or elder that is conducting the ceremony.

A group of four elders, presided over by Freda MacDonald, conducted a ceremony to consecrate a set of two eagle feathers. One was for Lorraine Brundige, the other for me. As a part of the ceremony, we passed around water for everyone to drink in turn. I was the first person to Freda's left, so I was the first to drink. When the water again reached Freda there was still some left. She passed it to me. I looked uncertain. She said, 'finish it'. I tossed it off at one gulp. Freda started laughing good-naturedly. 'Two feathers, two times around the circle', she explained. We all started joking about how I must be real thirsty, how people might think I was greedy for water and so on. It went on for some time. We finally finished the ceremony without a second circling of the water.

At the end of the ceremony, one of the elders I did not know from a nearby reserve began to talk to me in Anishnabe. I had no clue what she was talking about. My Anishnabe is limited to *Megwetch*, which is 'thank you', and *Ne'weeznin*, which is the closest I can come to 'Let's eat'. However, the elder was clearly imparting something of great importance, so I sat and listened to her intently. After a few minutes Freda began laughing again. 'Wrong kind of Indian', she said, 'he's a Choctaw not an Ojibway'.

Though its clear that such joking is partly to alleviate tension, gloss over slip-ups and maintain harmony and good-will it also makes sense that this practice is much easier if you do not 'believe' in a western sense. Certainly we have all seen humour used for these purposes in Euro-American ceremonies, but I think those that have experienced both would say the jokes flow much more freely and with less provocation, if any, at a Native American ceremony.

At this point it is important to repeat that this does not mean Native Americans disbelieve in their traditions. Far from it. The traditions are approached with great reverence. Indeed, I think the difference in Native American and Euro-American approaches is so basic and subtle that the English language strains to express it. Unfortunately, since most philosophical dialogue in this country is in English, it is likely that when pressed to the limit it would be better to say that Native American people firmly believe in their tradition than to imply any less reverence.

This is because English has equated belief with truth. Now, I'm doing some Euro-American looking philosophy. I hope you don't mind. Euro-Philosophers express beliefs as propositions and assign them truth values. When we assert a belief we are asserting the truth of a certain picture of the world. There is, on one hand, our worldview ... whether we are Native American or Euro-American ... and on the other hand the world. What has been called metaphorically, 'the map and the territory'. I think most of us agree that we all live in the same territory. I think it is also clear that the maps held by the Native Americans and Euro-Americans are quite different. However, the main point of this talk is belief. Belief is our attitude toward the relationship between the map and the territory. Western belief generally implies some kind of correspondence between the map and territory. The most extreme version of this is that we can have a completely clear and correct map, a one-to-one correspondence between the map and the territory. Or to put it in the vernacular, we can have the 'Truth'. This was clearly the project of the Enlightenment. Even though modern thought has cast doubt on this, the West still clings to it.

I would characterize the attitude of Native Americans as one of agnosticism concerning the relationship between their map and the territory. Though this may seem strange from a Western stance, it is actually very practical. Indeed, I would argue that it can even make a great deal of sense given modern Western understandings of the limits of knowledge. Think of Heisenberg and Gödel. Using the map and territory metaphor, Heisenberg seems to be telling us that the clearer our map of any particular part of the territory, the less clear our map will be elsewhere. Gödel seems to be telling us that when our map becomes too broad, it will be incorrect. If we go too far in detail or breadth, our map becomes confused.

The Native American map is not meant to be a high fidelity picture of the territory, but is an action guiding set of ideas. Indeed, the action guiding element is central. Remember the John Proctor story. Particular actions are what makes one Creek. One of the main puzzlements Indian people have expressed historically is how Europeans could assert the truth of their ideas, but act in ways that did not correspond to the truths they asserted. Popular sovereignty, religious freedom, the sanctity of property, peace, brotherhood and all the rest seem to be ignored nearly as often as they are upheld. Of course one answer is that there are bad people and bad governments who do not maintain their own lofty ideas. Though this is true, I think it is worsened by Western belief. If you are convinced that your map truly embodies the territory, despite the fact that it is necessarily incomplete or incorrect (and probably both) then you are going to make many false turns. Your actions will be contradictory. When you have mistaken the map for the territory, you will continue to claim that you have reached the right destination even when you are hopelessly lost.

Western philosophers are perhaps the best examples of this tendency and it is one that has cost them much in the way of practical influence in society. We have all entertained sceptical ideas, examined odd metaphysical systems and sometimes built careers defending their truth. But what if they are true? Many of the maps we have posited

cannot be followed. Just how should a solipsist act? Laying aside the question of truth, if your map cannot be followed, what use is it?

The Western rejoinder might be, 'How can agnosticism concerning the connection between the map and territory be action guiding?' The answer is that it cannot, but it is an attitude which can be very helpful. Though Native Americans may not know what the connection is between their map and the territory, there are some things that they do know. Key among these is their experience. This includes their own actions and the observed consequences of those actions.

The importance of direct experience and agnosticism concerning belief can be seen in various linguistic elements of the Choctaw language and other Native American languages. In Choctaw there is a marker to indicate when you are passing on second-hand experiences, a hearsay marker. Such markers are common among Native American languages. In Choctaw, for example, the phrase 'The cat is on the mat', might be translated, *Katosat shukbo binili*. If we say *Katosat shukbo binili-miha*, then we have disclaimed direct observation, we are saying that someone told us. Without the hearsay marker, the assumption is that what we are saying is a part of our experience. But the hearsay marker *miha* is just the beginning. There are a variety of markers that describe our attitude toward the source of the experience, its reliability, or whether that particular experience is shared. For example, *Katosat shukbo binili-hah* means something like 'Don't we agree that the cat is on the mat?' Some of the markers can be given rather humorous translations. *Katosat shukbo binili-cho* has been translated by one linguist as, 'The cat is on the mat, you idiot'. The *cho* marker implies that the cat is right in front of you, that you should open up your eyes.

These markers generally pick out a relationship between the person speaking and the statement, rather than between the statement and the world. In English, a statement asserts a particular picture of the world, in Choctaw you are more nearly relating an experience. It is difficult to assert a 'truth' in Choctaw. The closest you can come to an English affirmation of truth in Choctaw is to end your sentence with the word *hoke* (it is pronounced ho kay). This word is so powerful that it is often followed by an exclamation point in writing or is stressed when speaking. Though it is an affirmation, you would never say *Katosat shukbo binili hoke!* regardless of how 'certain' you were that the cat was on the mat. *Hoke* is mainly used in cases like *Lashpa hoke!* Since *lashpa* means hot, idiomatically the phrase might be translated, 'It sure is hot!' *Hoke* underscores your experience of the world, it does not assert the 'truth' of some picture of that world. The closest the marker comes to such an assertion is probably its use in the phrase *Chatah sia hoke!* This is generally translated, 'I am Choctaw' though this would be the meaning even without the affirmation *hoke*. With the affirmation in place, you might translate it as 'I am Choctaw and you can't say otherwise'. It is not only an affirmation, but a defiant one. The question remains, is it asserting a truth about the world, an experience of that world or maybe an attitude toward one or both? Whatever the answer, the most powerful affirmation in the Choctaw language does not assert truth in the way even a relatively ambiguous English sentence does.

Possibly the most telling example is the kind of response that a traditional Native person will give in answer to a question. I don't know how many Indian related conferences I have been to, where some non-Indian academic will ask a medicine-person or elder a question. The response they seek is a statement of the way things are, a truth, a detailed map of the territory. The answer that they get is a rambling narrative, of the kind I expected from John Proctor in the story I related earlier. The

narrative is generally a story from their own life, maybe with a few traditional side stories. At the end, the academic is usually puzzled. Their reaction is often negative. In the worst cases, the academic may assert that the elder was just making up a story because they did not understand their own traditions. I have seen this done again and again. One philosopher, whom I will not name, has even told me how he often has to explain Indian traditions to the Indians themselves. From his perspective, his map is right and they have lost theirs.

Fortunately or unfortunately, many traditional values, including respect, will prompt the Indian person to sit still for an impromptu lecture on their own traditions. Some take it with mild amusement at the absurdity. You can imagine the kind of markers they might use in characterizing where they heard this information. Though Choctaw does not have a marker that means, 'I heard this from a non-Indian who thinks he knows more about us than we do', it is possible that Kiowa does. They have a lot more markers of this kind than we do. Some elders, particularly those that are the most traditional, might just report it as straight news. Respect is a part of this, but the respect is partly born out of epistemic humility. When you do not claim to have a correct map of the world, then you do not claim to have the 'Truth'. You are willing to accept that other people have maps that are as good (or as bad) as your own. When your map primarily traces your own path through life, then you are always eager to share stories and broaden your map. A traditional elder might well listen attentively to an anthropological lecture concerning his own customs and traditions. After all, it will be an interesting experience that may provide many insights—if only into the thinking of anthropologists. The Indian person that listens to such lectures is genuinely interested. The Western conclusion that such a person must not know their traditions or they would not want to listen, completely misses the point.

Knowledge is narrative of a life lived in the world. The individual stories are what you know. They may or may not provide a map of the world, but they do tell you about the consequences of your actions. You can learn much even if you believe little. You can even be taught. Here another short story might be useful.

After a long day's work I was supposed to help unload a bunch of tables and chairs at the new Choctaw center in Oklahoma City. Mr Amos Dorsey, an older full-blood Creek and I were going to work together. There was quite a bit of work to do and I wanted to get home, so I threw myself into the work—busily hustling back and forth. Mr Dorsey began to work too, but a bit slower and only after watching me for a second or two. Indeed, as he worked and watched me, I could almost swear he was actually going even slower. Eventually, it was as if he was going in slow-motion. Of course, part of that was due to my haste. As we worked and I fumed a bit at his slowness, I finally realized that somehow he was actually getting more done than I was. Mr Dorsey respected the task, understood the context and set about working efficiently. However, I think it was also an instance of teaching. I can not help but think he slowed down as he saw my thoughtless, disrespectful haste and then speeded up as he saw that I had learned my lesson and was working efficiently.

Now, we could assert some 'Truths' here. We might say that 'Haste makes waste'. Yet of course, the 'Early bird got the worm'. Just about any 'Truth' we might assert—particularly action guiding truths—are going to have contradictory 'Truths' that can be abstracted out of other stories. Thus we have the contradictory actions. This search for 'Truth' is the European tradition. The Native tradition does not abstract truths out of the stories, the stories are often abstract enough in themselves without

further removing them from reality. The narrative is as close to the truth as you can get. In the end, I think that the two epistemic systems may converge. As the Euro-American tradition refines its truths, resolving the contradictions by adding more and more exceptions and greater and greater complexity, these truths may eventually more nearly resemble stories. In the meantime, Indian people will be waiting at the fire already telling some good ones.

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Notes

1. Some of the material in section 1 of this paper is from Cheney (2001) and appears here with the permission of the State University of New York Press.
2. Yet there are some points of resonance between these worlds—the resonating reports from the Euro-American side usually being maverick minority reports (see Cheney, 1998). One such point of resonance with Native American worlds is Walker (1989). As Walker is to Native American ethical epistemology, so Nobel prize-winning cytologist Barbara McClintock is to Native American natural science epistemology (see Keller, 1985).
3. The reader must be forewarned at the outset about an easy confusion. Ceremonial worlds are not ceremonies. The ‘real’ world (of subsistence, say) is not separate from some ‘ceremonial’ world—as I use the term. I am not contrasting profane and sacred worlds. Nor does the term ‘ceremonial world’ mark off certain activities (ceremonies) from others (e.g. hunting). The real world in which hunting takes place *is* a ceremonial world (see Cheney and Hester, 2000, especially section IV, and Hyde, 1998).
4. In conversation at the Colloquium on Environment, Ethics, and Education, Yukon College, Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, 14–16 July 1995, and in a follow-up telephone conversation (see Cheney, 1996).
5. The ‘defeat and confusion’ of which Goodman and Elgin speak are the result of failings that contemporary epistemology has been quick to expose. For example, ‘Construed as correspondence between discourse and the readymade world beyond discourse, [truth] is incomprehensible’ (Goodman and Elgin, 1988, p. 154). Goodman and Elgin shift their focus from truth, certainty, and knowledge to ‘rightness’, ‘adoption’, and ‘understanding’ (respectively). ‘Rightness is a matter of fitting and working ... [.] fitting *into* a context or discourse or standing complex of other symbols ... The fitting is tested by the working, by the *working* of work in hand or in prospect’. Goodman and Elgin are not offering a coherence or pragmatic theory of *truth*; they are recommending that we switch our focus from ‘truth’ to ‘rightness’, ‘a concept with greater reach than truth’. As a replacement for ‘certainty’ Goodman and Elgin propose, not ‘alternatives such as probability, belief, and assent’, but ‘adoption’.

Adoption is a matter of putting to work, of making or trying to make a fit ... Adoption does *not* imply any degree of confidence ... [T]he overall effort is toward achieving a relatively durable but flexible and productive network of adoptions ... Finally, knowledge ... give way ... to understanding ... 'Understanding' is a versatile term for a skill, a process, an accomplishment. First, the understanding is what might be called the cognitive 'faculty' in an inclusive sense: the collection of abilities to inquire and invent, discriminate and discover, connect and clarify, order and organize, adopt, test, reject. Second, understanding, is the *process* of using such skills for the cognitive making and remaking of a world, worlds, or a world of worlds. (Goodman and Elgin, 1988, pp. 155–161).

6. The six articles from which I draw are collected in Deloria *et al.*, 1999. Internal references (citing page numbers only) are to this collection. These articles are listed individually in the bibliography.
7. A word of caution is necessary concerning the use of such phrases as 'ethically informed' in a Native American context. As Carol Geddes (Tlingit) explained in response to a question concerning the meaning of the Tlingit notion of respect (perhaps the central—certainly the most widely used—'ethical' concept among Native American peoples): 'It does not have a very precise definition in translation—the way it is used in English. It is more like awareness. It is more like knowledge and that is a very important distinction, because it is not like a moral law, it is more like something that is just a part of your whole awareness' (Jickling, 1996, p. 279). For an extended discussion, see Hester *et al.* (2000).
8. For a striking example within Western science of a maverick epistemology and critique of typical Western epistemology similar to those depicted by Deloria, see Keller's account of the work of Nobel prize-winning cytologist Barbara McClintock:

To McClintock, nature is characterized by an a priori complexity that vastly exceeds the capacities of the human imagination. Her recurrent remark, 'Anything you can think of you will find', is a statement about the capacities not of mind but of nature. It is meant ... as a comment on the resourcefulness of natural order; in the sense not so much of adaptability as of largesse and prodigality ... Precisely because the complexity of nature exceeds our own imaginative possibilities, it becomes essential to 'let the experiment tell you what do do'. Her major criticism of contemporary research is based on what she sees as inadequate humility. She feels that 'much of the work done is done because one wants to impose an answer on it ... If you'd only just let the material tell you'. Respect for complexity thus demands from observers of nature the same special attention to the exceptional case that McClintock's own example as a scientist demands from observers of science: 'If the material tells you, "It may be this", allow that. Don't turn it aside and call it an exception, an aberration, a contaminant ...' 'I start with the seedling, and I don't want to leave it. I don't feel I really know the story if I don't watch the plant all the way along. So I know every plant in the field. I know them intimately, and I find it a great pleasure to know them' ... Her vocabulary is consistently a vocabulary of affection, of kinship, of empathy. ... McClintock can risk the suspension of boundaries between subject and object without jeopardy to science precisely because, to her, science is not premised on that division ... She describes the state of mind accompanying the crucial shift in orientation that enabled her to identify chromosomes she had earlier not been able to distinguish: 'I found that the more I worked with them, the bigger and bigger [the chromosomes] got, and when I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system. I was right down there with them, and everything got big. I was even able to see the internal parts of the chromosomes—actually, everything was there. It surprised me because I actually felt as if I was right down there and these were my friends ... As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself (Keller, 1985, pp. 162–165). I find it impossible to dismiss the similarity of this account to Deloria's accounts of mature experience, interspecies communication and vision. See also Keller (1983) for more detail concerning McClintock's epistemological method and its connection with her ability to see through the microscopes of the time what no one else could see—claims which have since been verified by other means.

9. Which does not mean that the account is not historically accurate, merely mythical, or the like. It means that the central role of the White Buffalo Calf Woman story and the ceremonies it conveys is to orient the people with respect to 'the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk'.
10. Emphasis added to the statements of the three principles of epistemological method.
11. With reference to the Canadian Inuit philosopher Gordon Christie.
12. The indigenous ideas on which I (Jim) draw in section 1 of the present paper are filtered through the conceptual lens of the Western-defined problematics that I address. I do not claim to understand indigenous thought as that thought lives in indigenous worlds. The only real authorities on indigenous thought are indigenous people themselves—as in section 2 of this paper (in which Lee registers disclaimers of his own). I only claim that this thought as I understand it sheds light on a question posed from within the Western philosophical tradition: how important is truth to knowledge and epistemology?

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