**Etemeyaske Vpokat (Living Together Peacefully):**

**How the Muscogee Concept of *Harmony* Can Provide a Structure to Morality[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Pre-published Draft

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“And now we had no place to live, since we didn’t know

How to live with each other.”

Joy Harjo, “Once the World Was Perfect,” *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*

**1. Introduction**

For the Muscogee (Creek) peoples,[[2]](#footnote-2) their relationships to their surroundings is essential to moral knowledge, including determining the moral status of actions. Maintaining and sustaining these relationships requires having knowledge of how the land operates, how people effect and are affected by the land (i.e., how people are a part of the rest of the natural world), cultural norms, and individuals’ place in culture.

Knowledge and understanding of those things with whom we share a relationship is morally relevant because it provides a way of promoting *harmony*. Promoting harmony, then, is a normative principle that serves as the foundation for moral knowledge and the guide to morally worthwhile action. Moral knowledge is knowledge about promoting harmony, and morally worthwhile actions are those actions that promote harmony.

For example, given the importance indigenous peoples place on living in, and as a part of, the natural world, knowledge of the land is essential for living in and promoting harmony. Knowledge of traditions and cultural practices also become morally relevant because people live within, and are a part of, groups of other people.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, promoting harmony requires knowledge of both the land and their culture. And, given that people live with, and as a part of, the land and a culture, living a good life requires promoting harmony within these necessary components of life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are, thus, at least three identifying features of this indigenous account of ethics (i.e., indigenous metaethics) that I will be focusing on: (1) the foundational role of the concept of harmony; (2) the view that existing necessarily means having and interacting with one’s surroundings; and (3) the role that non-normative knowledge plays in determining the moral status of an action.

Drawing primarily from the cultural traditions and beliefs of the Muscogee peoples, I will provide an account of how harmony *can* play a foundational role in providing a structure to morality.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the process of providing this account, I will begin (§2) by defining two key Muscogee concepts: ‘energy’ (§2.1) and ‘harmony’ (§2.2). I will also explain how the relationship between these two concepts can provide a structure for morality. Then I will explain the conditions that make promoting harmony a normative principle (§3) by explaining why promoting harmony is relevant to humans (§3.1) as well as a providing a prudential reason to promote harmony (§3.2). Finally, I will explain how harmony can be achieved (§4) by explaining two examples that highlight the importance of non-moral knowledge in promoting harmony. I will then conclude with some remarks about how the Muscogee concept of harmony relates to some contemporary metaethical concerns (§5).

**2. Energy and Exchange: The Foundational Role of Harmony**

Before providing an account of how harmony can play a foundational role in understanding morality, some definitions and concepts need to be explained. Before turning to these explanations, there are a few things that need to be clarified. First, there is no Mvskoke word that *directly* translates to the English word ‘harmony.’ The relevant concept of harmony can be understood as ‘living together peacefully,’ and is expressed in Mvskoke by the phrase ‘*etemeyaske vpokat.*’[[6]](#footnote-6) Second, I will only be drawing on Muscogee resources.[[7]](#footnote-7) While there may be a lot of similarities between different indigenous or Native American groups regarding their understanding of ethics, I’m hesitant to label this as a broadly ‘indigenous’ or ‘American Indian/Native American’ approach because I worry it would be a form of ignoring the perhaps subtle, but important, differences between various indigenous groups. Although the Muscogee understanding of ethics may resemble other indigenous or Native American understanding of ethics, I want to maintain its independence from other indigenous approaches.[[8]](#footnote-8) Relatedly, there are accounts of Muscogee living from the perspectives of white people and colonizers, but for this paper I won’t be using these accounts. Although they may be interesting or even accurate, they are still outsider accounts and I’m trying to lessen the possibility of my explanations of Muscogee concepts being altered by the influence of other cultures. Finally, understanding harmony requires an understanding of some basic elements of Muscogee cosmology and religion. Though I can’t provide a comprehensive explanation of these topics, my hope is to provide enough of an explanation to understand the concept of harmony.

**2.1. Some Key Descriptive Elements of the Muscogee Belief System**

For the Muscogee, everything is linked by a single unifying source: energy.[[9]](#footnote-9) Energy flows through all things. This concept of energy may be further explained by, or reduced to, some more basic or simple property, but doing so seems unnecessary to provide an account of how harmony can play a foundational role for morality. For the purposes of this paper, I’m going to be working with the understanding that ‘energy’ is something that is common amongst all things.

Collectively, all energy forms a single entity known as Ibofanga (*Epohfvnkv*) - which is the most sacred thing/being in all existence. Although Ibofanga is the most sacred being in existence, prayers are never addressed to Ibofanga. It’s believed that Ibofanga is too busy and too sacred to disturb with our prayers. Instead, prayers and thanks were shared with Hesagedamesse (*hesaketvmese*)– the Maker of Breath. Hesagedamesse is one of Ibofanga’s four assistants, or instruments, and helps to connect Ibofanga to the empirical world. In this case, Hesagedamesse represents wind while fire, water, and earth are represented by Pojasa, Wewafulla (*Yewvfullv*), and Igana Jaga (*Ekvnvvcakv*), respectively[[10]](#footnote-10). Prayers may be made to any of the assistants, but they are most often directed to Hesagedamesse since it is The Giver and Taker of Breath (i.e., life), thereby controlling the energy that connects all *living* things. These assistants are *not* static entities. As they are instruments of Ibofanga, the ultimate collection of energy, they are changed *by* energy. In other words, energy flows through wind, fire, water, and earth, and these can take many different forms/shapes. As Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri (2001) state:

The dynamics of Ibofanga’s energy operate through four major elements: air, fire, water, and earth. These elements are *not* material atoms. The form of the energy gives them their personality. These four fundamental elements, with different combinations of energy running through them, account for all the phenomena of the universe. These elements, in turn, are not fixed material entities because they are constantly transformed by energy – the principles of transformation and reciprocity are important keys to the Creek mind.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This explanation of these sacred figures and relationships is meant to emphasize the importance of the concept of energy. While there may still be metaphysical questions concerning the exact nature of such figures and their relationships, the fact that the totality of energy (Ibofanga) is held to be the most sacred entity, and its ways of interacting with the empirical world (the four assistants: wind (via Hesagedamesse), fire (via Pojasa), water (via Wewafulla), and earth (via Igana Jaga)) are also considered sacred highlights the importance of the concept of energy.

Interactions between things are explained as *exchanges of energy*. Taking food from the land and eating it, for example, is the taking of energy. Relatedly, planting food, caring for the land, and appropriately cultivating it is the giving of energy. This relationship is an example of how energy is exchanged. We are sustained and nourished by exchanging energy with the land.

When interacting with our surroundings, we are exchanging energy. For the purposes of this paper, the phrase ‘exchanging energy’ can be thought of as referring to interactions with other things. Thus, there is no need for a more basic or reductive definition.

**2.2. A Foundational Normative Element of the Muscogee Belief System**

So far these are just descriptions or explanations of features of the world. Nothing explicitly normative comes from these descriptions alone.[[12]](#footnote-12) In order to account for the existence of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ways of behaving or interacting within the world, there needs to be some explicitly normative principle that provides a standard by which we can measure behaviors and interactions as good or bad.

Such a principle is provided with reference to the concept of harmony. I’m going to refer to this principle as ‘The Principle of Harmony’:

**The Principle of Harmony:** Harmony ought to be promoted, and disharmony ought to be avoided.

When energy is exchanged, there ought to be balance, and balancing energy means *reciprocating*. Reciprocation can take many forms, such as prayers, gift giving, cultivating, and providing care, which may or may not involve non-violence or peace. In other words, talk of reciprocity and balance is not synonymous with talk of any particular ritual or action, or with talk of peace.

Given that humans have relationships with many different aspects of their surroundings (e.g., other humans, non-human animals, plants, inanimate objects, etc.), and these aspects have various characteristics (e.g., the different tribal memberships or languages of humans, the various kinds and ages of non-human animals, differing roles of inanimate objects in their ecosystems, etc.), no particular ritual or act is going to always appropriately reciprocate the energy exchanged in the interactions with these different aspects of one’s surroundings. How one reciprocates with a human may not be an appropriate way of reciprocating with a tree. This is primarily because of the different kinds of thing a human and a tree are, and, as such, the different relationships a human shares with each of those entities. Humans and trees require different things to survive and live well. Therefore, what counts as reciprocation is going to differ given the kind of existence these entities are displaying. Even amongst entities of the same class (e.g., humans), the different characteristics that each human possesses are going to influence their relationship with that person and what counts as reciprocation. The relationship I have with my parents differs from the relationship I have with my siblings, and each of these differs from the relationships I have with other people in my life (friends, co-workers, students, people from differing tribes, states, and countries, etc.). These differing relationships affect what qualifies as reciprocation. As an analogy, just because something is a good gift for one person doesn’t mean it’s an appropriate gift for everyone - a sensual or romantic gift may be a good way of acknowledging your love and appreciation of your partner, but it’s probably not a good gift to give your mother.

Since reciprocity is a way of balancing energy, then reciprocating could conceivably sometimes take the form of actions that would otherwise, or most of the time, seem bad. Actions that may be bad most of the time may be justified if that action balances energy. For example, if a transgression (e.g., an act of war, assault, the taking of hostages, etc.) has occurred, then reciprocation may require similar actions (that would otherwise be bad) as a way of balancing energy.[[13]](#footnote-13) In other words, seemingly bad actions may be justified if these actions balance an exchange of energy.

As an example, consider an explanation involving corporal punishment from Sarah Deer’s (2015) discussion of gendered violence against American Indian/Native American women. To show federal officials that the Muscogee were law-abiding, they began writing down their laws earlier than most tribes. In 1825 fifty-six criminal laws were written down with the thirty-fifth law addressing gendered violence: “And be it farther enacted if any person or persons should undertake to force a woman and did it by force, it shall be left to woman what punishment she should satisfied with to whip or pay what she say it be law.”[[14]](#footnote-14) As Deer (20015) points out, there are several important concepts highlighted in this law:

The word “force” (used twice) is an important clue that this passage describes a physical attack and the law clearly refers to women as victims (although it does not indicate the gender of perpetrators). There is a clear reference to corporal punishment (“whip or pay”) – which is consistent with observed Mvskoke law in practice in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps most remarkable component of this law is the last six words: “what she say it be law.” This phrase, suggesting a… victim had legal standing to participate in sentencing decisions, is fundamentally inconsistent with Anglo-American… law in the same time period.[[15]](#footnote-15)

While the actions that are done in the name of corporal punishment aren’t usually permitted, they’re permitted as a punishment to rectify a wrong that has occurred (such as gendered violence). Given the Principle of Harmony, the severity of acts of gendered violence may be rectified by similarly severe (corporal) punishment. One important concept that I’d like to point out in this law regards the implied role of harmony in deciding on the punishment. As is stated, women (the victims) participate in decisions about punishment. The victim being given a say in punishment may be done as a means of promoting harmony. The woman wronged gets to decide which punishment would best rectify the wrong done to her.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Although balancing energy exchanges requires taking into account our relationships with the various kinds of entities (as well as the varying characteristics between those entities), and although this is sometimes done using seemingly bad actions, these actions are all acts of *love*.

Harmony is a tolerance, a forgiving, a blending – subtle, soft, but very strong. In order to live in harmony, the common denominator that binds is ‘loving one another’ in its truest form.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Love is an act, and acts that promote harmony are acts of love. In other words, when there’s harmony, there’s love. Love is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for harmony. When things are in a state of harmony, or when an act promotes harmony, that act is then an act of love, or things are in a state of love. As was previously mentioned, seemingly bad actions can be justified if they are an act of love. For example, parents may discipline their children because they love them, and though this discipline may be unpleasant for the parents, it may still be necessary as a way of instilling certain values or behaviors or as a way of rectifying disharmony created by the child. However, disciplinary actions should only be taken when a wrong has occurred. Or, in other words, when an act by the child needs to be reciprocated. The discipline may be bad in the absence of any wrongdoing on behalf of the child, but in order to balance the energy created by the child’s wrong – to reciprocate the wrong done by the child – discipline may be necessary. If the act of disciplining the child promotes harmony, then it’s an act of love.

When energy is balanced – i.e., when an exchange of energy has been reciprocated – there is said to be harmony, and harmony is a state where living things live together peacefully. What it means to live together peacefully is to love one another. Again, what it means to live together peacefully or “love one another” differs based on the relationship that is shared with a particular entity. Loving a tree is very different from loving your father, and loving your father is very different from loving your co-worker. A sign of love for my father may be giving him tickets to a sporting event because he loves attending sporting events, but this doesn’t mean tickets to a sporting event are a sign of love for my co-worker if they don’t love attending sporting events (and giving a tree tickets to a sporting event is just stupid).

However, harmony is realized when love is successfully shared and conveyed. To live in harmony with a tree, I have to love the tree. If I love a tree – meaning, I reciprocate with it (e.g., care for it by watering it, protecting it, nurturing it, etc.) – then the tree will provide love back.

To summarize: we interact with our surroundings, and these interactions involve an exchange of energy. Harmony is present when an exchange of energy is balanced. Balancing energy means reciprocating an exchange of energy. Reciprocation takes different forms depending on the kind of relationship that’s shared between two entities. However, all forms of reciprocation involve love. Therefore, harmony is present when love is shared in a particular relationship.[[18]](#footnote-18)

While promoting harmony makes actions morally good, conversely, creating disharmony makes actions morally bad. Since there may be numerous different actions that could equally reciprocate and balance energy, then any one of those actions would be permissible as a way of promoting harmony. In other words, of the actions that are available, as long as those actions promote harmony, then choosing any of them would be a permissible means of promoting harmony.

However, there’s a question concerning whether the goodness of promoting harmony itself implies that not promoting harmony is bad. For this implication to follow it has to be the case that every action is either good or bad. Or, in terms of harmony, every action would have to either promote or disrupt harmony. Just because promoting harmony is good doesn’t, by itself, entail that not promoting it is bad. It could be neutral.

The question then becomes are actions that fail to promote harmony, or actions that create disharmony, bad or merely neutral? It seems to make more sense to think that all actions are either good or bad instead of all actions being either good or neutral. In other words, there are no morally neutral actions.[[19]](#footnote-19) Since harmony exists when energy is balanced, and energy is balanced when reciprocation has taken place, then harmony exists when exchanges of energy have been reciprocated. Given energy exchanges occur when we interact with our surroundings, then taking energy without reciprocating creates an imbalance. So long as every interaction is an exchange of energy, then every interaction either takes or reciprocates energy. There isn’t a third option. That being the case, if we’re trying to judge the moral permissibility of an action and we know that promoting harmony is good, that means that disrupting harmony (i.e., unbalancing energy, or taking energy without reciprocating) is either considered to be neutral or bad. Since it would be really unintuitive to claim that there are no bad actions, I’m inclined to think disruptions of harmony are bad instead of merely neutral.[[20]](#footnote-20)

None of this, however, tells us what kind of property harmony is, nor does it tell us from whence the Principle of Harmony gets its normative force.

Harmony itself, as described above, is a property of the natural world. Since harmony is a relational property between exchanges of energy, and energy is a part of the natural world, then harmony is a property of the natural world that exists when energy is balanced.

Since ‘harmony’ is a property of the natural world, the Principle of Harmony can be seen as a kind of natural law. Similar to Aristotelean natural law theory in contemporary metaethics, [[21]](#footnote-21) wherein goodness is non-subjective and the parameters for practical rationality (i.e., what is practically rational) are set by nature, the Principle of Harmony is non-subjective and helps sets the parameters of practical rationality with reference to the natural world. The Principle of Harmony is non-subjective in that it is a fact of the natural world that energy is exchanged and our intertwinement with our surroundings makes it such that our well-being is dependent on the well-being of our surroundings. The parameters of practical rationality are set by nature since every action is an exchange of energy and what practically ought to be done, given our intertwinement with our surroundings, depends on our surroundings (which can change and differ for groups of people). In this regard, it gets its normative force from the same place that other natural laws get their force: the natural world.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In summary, harmony is a relational property of the natural world, and the Principle of Harmony is akin to a natural law. It’s a brute fact of the world that doesn’t have a justification.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**3. Situations and Surroundings: The Need for Harmony**

Although the Principle of Harmony provides a structure to morality by providing a standard by which we can assess the moral permissibility of actions, it hasn’t yet been justified. In other words, it’s not yet clear *why* we ought to promote harmony and avoid disharmony. This ‘ought’ can be understood as a moral-ought or a prudential-ought. When understood as a moral-ought, then the question concerning the normative force of the Principle of Harmony is non-sensical. It’s just a brute fact of the world. However, even if the Principle of Harmony is a brute fact of the world, we can still explain why the Principle of Harmony is relevant to us (humans). This won’t provide a *moral* justification for the Principle of Harmony; however, it can provide us with a *prudential* justification and help to explain how such a principle could exist.

To that end, I will provide an argument that we have a prudential reason to follow the Principle of Harmony. Although this prudential reason is not meant to be a moral justification of the principle, it’s still morally relevant because it can motivate people to act on the Principle of Harmony.

**3.1. Conditions for the Principle of Harmony**

The Muscogee healer Bear Heart provides the beginning of an explanation of a prudential reason to follow the Principle of Harmony when he states: “Our existence is so intertwined that our survival depends upon maintaining a balanced relationship with everything.”[[24]](#footnote-24) In this section I will elaborate upon this idea that the Principle of Harmony is relevant to us because of some essential conditions of existence.

These conditions concern relationships that are inevitable for any human. For humans, to exist requires being in some surrounding, and it requires interacting with that surrounding. The nature of that surrounding can differ, but existence entails existing somewhere. I cannot conceive of what it would mean to say that something exists absent of any surrounding. We, thus, have a necessary relationship with our surrounding – our place of existence (whatever or wherever that surrounding may be). And, existing in that surrounding entails that we necessarily interact with or in that surrounding.

Thus, there are two essential conditions of existence for humans:

**Condition 1:** *Surroundings* – to exist requires you to exist somewhere; or, to exist means you have some surroundings.

**Condition 2:** *Relationships* – to have surroundings requires you to interact with that surrounding; or, to have a surrounding means you have some relationship with that surrounding.

Given that these relationships (the ones with our surroundings) are inevitable, promoting harmony helps us to survive. Since we necessarily exchange energy by existing, our survival, as well as every other living thing’s survival, depends on promoting harmony. If our surroundings are destroyed, we may be negatively affected. Likewise, if our surroundings are doing well, we’re more likely to do well. The well-being of the things we’re in relationships with is tied to our own well-being. This isn’t meant to be an egoistic or individualistic justification.[[25]](#footnote-25) In other words, the idea isn’t that each individual will live their best life by promoting harmony. Rather, ‘us,’ ‘our,’ ‘we,’ refers to the collective of things within the surroundings. So, it’s not that it’s in our individual best interest, it’s in the best interest of the collective.

These situations and relationships that we inevitably find ourselves in *help* to provide a structure to morality. However, these conditions by themselves don’t entail anything about how we ought to react to our surroundings or how we ought to interact in our relationships.

Since existence entails existing somewhere (i.e., having surroundings), and having surroundings entails having relationships or interactions with those surroundings, it is necessary to care for those surroundings *in order to* collectively live well. ‘Care,’ in this case, means promoting harmony.[[26]](#footnote-26) This means that promoting harmony (following the Principle of Harmony) is constitutive of living a good life or living well.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Living well entails promoting harmony because of what it means to ‘live’ or ‘exist.’ To exist requires that you exist somewhere, and existing somewhere requires that you have a relationship with that surrounding. These requirements, by themselves, don’t entail anything specific about how that relationship ought to function (or, how we ought to conduct ourselves in that relationship). However, given the assumption that someone wants to live *well*, the Principle of Harmony arises as a means of how to live a good life. Living well means living in harmony with your surroundings.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**3.2 Prudential Reason to Follow the Principle of Harmony**

The normative force of the Principle of Harmony isn’t a command that comes from sacred beings (e.g., Ibofanga or Hesagedamesse), nor does it issue from those things with which we exchange energy (e.g., the land, ourselves, or other animals). It’s just a brute demand that is relevant for us because we exist in the world. However, we can still provide an argument for why individuals ought to follow or be motivated by the Principle of Harmony.

Considering the points made in §3.1, we can provide the following argument (the brackets contain the justifications for the premises):

**Premise 1:** We interact or have a relationship with our surroundings. [Given the conditions for existence]

**Premise 2:** We want to live well. [Assumption]

**Premise 3:** If we interact or have a relationship with our surroundings, and want to live well, then we ought to promote harmony. [Our living well depends on our surroundings doing well – given the intertwinement of our existence]

**Therefore**, we ought to promote harmony.[From premises 1, 2, and 3]

As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, the justification just offered is meant to offer a prudential reason for people to accept the Principle of Harmony that can motivate us to act. What motivates people to act on the Principle of Harmony is a distinct question that can be separated from the question of the moral grounds of the principle. So, there’s a prudential reason to follow the Principle of Harmony that provides the principle with one type of normative force, but this doesn’t qualify as a moral justification for the principle. In other words, although this argument may provide some normative force to support actions in accordance with the Principle of Harmony, this normative force isn’t necessarily a moral force.

As was mentioned in footnote 22 of §3.1, this may be an egoistic reason to follow the Principle of Harmony. It may be egoistic because the normative force comes from an appeal to what’s in the agent’s own best interest. Since *I* have a relationship with *my* surroundings, then *I* ought to promote harmony. This is what makes it a prudential reason.

However, ‘self-interest,’ in this case, means something different than what it means in other discussions of egoism because there’s a different conception of the self. Part of what constitutes the self, in this conception, is the surroundings. *I* am not separable from *my surroundings*. And, since having surroundings entails having relationships, *I* am not separable from *my relationships*. Therefore, at least part of what constitutes the self is our relationships with our surroundings. Appealing to this wholistic conception of ‘self’ may still be a type of self-interest, but since the self is partly made of surroundings and relationships in those surroundings, considerations of harmony will appeal to those surroundings and relationships. In other words, if someone’s interest in harmony stems from self-interest, she must also be interested in her surroundings and relationships since they are constitutive of the self.

Given the explanations in §3.1 and §3.2, promoting harmony is constitutive of a good life in two ways. First, it’s constitutive of ‘living well’ because our *existence* is so intertwined with our surroundings. Second, since *our* existence is so intertwined with our surroundings, it’s also constitutive of the ‘self.’ Taken together, our living well and our self are partly constituted by relations to our surroundings. This makes it so that it’s hard to separate oneself and one’s life from its surroundings. In some sense, explaining ourselves independently of our surroundings (or vice versa) doesn’t make sense. What it means to live well is to have your surroundings do well, and you don’t have a self without surroundings. Similarly, it doesn’t make sense to talk of *our* living and *our* self as if these were two separable concepts. What it means to live is to have a self, just like what it means to have a self is to live.[[29]](#footnote-29) I’ve tried to appeal to each of these as separate entities or concepts, but I’ve only done so in order to explain the existence and force of the Principle of Harmony. To do that in terms of contemporary terms, I have to explain how these separable, western concepts are related.

To conclude this section, the explanations in the previous section (§2) show that the Principle of Harmony can play a foundational role in providing a structure to morality, and the explanations in this section (§3) show that actions recommended by using the principle are prudentially rational given the situations and relationships we find ourselves in. One way of understanding the structure of this paper is that §2 defines the Principle of Harmony, §3 prudentially justifies the Principle of Harmony, and §4 will explain how to use the Principle of Harmony.

**4. Nature and Normativity: The Way to Achieve Harmony**

The previous two sections were about the first two of three core features of this account of indigenous metaethics: (1) the foundational role that the Principle of Harmony plays in providing a structure to morality, and (2) that our relationships – which result from situations that we necessarily find ourselves in – prudentially justify the Principle of Harmony. This section is about the third core feature of this account of indigenous metaethics: (3) the role that non-moral knowledge plays in determining the moral status of an action.

In order to bring about harmony, one has to know about one’s relation to the thing they’re reciprocating, or in a relationship, with. In other words, knowing how to bring about harmony requires knowing how to reciprocate, and knowing how to reciprocate depends on knowing about the relationship. To illustrate the role of non-moral knowledge in bringing about balance and reciprocating, I will offer an explanation of hunting as an example.

Achieving harmony when hunting is encouraged by hunting for the right reasons. Hunting is supposed to be done out of necessity for the purpose of providing nourishment. As such, actions during a hunt that don’t aim towards these purposes are actions that aren’t taught or encouraged because they didn’t encourage good skills. And these skills are those that promote harmony. Hunting for anger, sport, or pride was not something that was taught by Muscogees. “Never kill out of anger, nor for sport to see how many animals you can kill. Take just enough for survival and always be respectful of the four-leggeds. *If you must kill, present an offering and talk to the animal, explaining, ‘I need you for my family*.’”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Having and developing the right reasons can promote harmony by helping to establish good traits or practices. Those traits or practices, then, help to ensure that when hunting occurs the actions taken are those that are done with love and promote reciprocity. In other words, the actions that result from having the right reasons are traits or practices that help promote harmony *each time* a hunt occurs. That’s what makes them the *right* reasons: they are the reasons that help to promote harmony.

The ritual and process of how one ought to hunt is explained by Bear Heart:

Children were not allowed to hunt until they became skilled with their weapons. We were taught the anatomical structure of each animal and exactly where to hit so it would die quickly and not suffer more than it had to. When we brought back the kill, even that was a ceremony. We gave an offering to the animal, honoring it and explaining why we took its life.

Young boys were taught never to eat their first kill – they were to give it to an elder. If you just killed and ate it yourself, that’s about all you’d be able to do – you would not become a great hunter because you weren’t showing much respect for the animal that you killed. But if you killed and made a sacrifice, giving that meat to others, then the motive for taking that life was based on generosity and respect. Those were the traits of a good hunter.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The thing I want to emphasize about this description of how to hunt is the importance of non-moral knowledge in developing the right reasons. To be a good hunter, the hunter needs to be motivated by generosity and respect. In order to develop these as motives a few different practices were encouraged.

Before discussing these practices, however, I want to point out an important assumption here: that a person can develop certain motives by acting in certain ways. This is a non-moral belief regarding how humans learn and how they develop motivations. By encouraging and teaching young boys to hunt in certain ways, those young boys would then develop the appropriate kinds of motives. This is a distinctive assumption: actions can be used to develop motives. While motives can influence actions, the ability of actions to influence motives creates a feedback loop. Good actions and behaviors are encouraged and supported until good motives are developed. Then, those good motives make it more likely that good actions occur.

The practices that were used to develop the motives of respect and generosity required only non-moral knowledge. These practices included being skilled with weaponry, minimizing suffering, giving the first kill to an elder, and making an offering to the animal. Being skilled with weaponry requires knowing about the weaponry (e.g., how it’s constructed, how to store it, how to repair it, etc.), and knowing the human body well enough to know how use the weapon (e.g., how to move the body in such a way – the motions and forms - as to use the weapon). These are both non-moral beliefs. Minimizing suffering requires knowing how to most efficiently and effectively use weaponry as well; however, it also requires knowing the anatomy of the animal being hunted. Since hunting was done out of necessity, and the pain of the hunted animal was an unfortunate side-effect of this necessity, the pain that accompanied the death of the hunted animal was to be minimized. To do this, a hunter had to know how to effectively use their weaponry to strike the hunted animal in such a way as to end its life as quickly and painlessly as possible. After an animal had been killed, there was a ceremony and offering as a sign of gratitude towards the animal (and Ibofanga). Since the hunted animal is a part of the natural world, as was Ibofanga and other sacred entities or concepts, the knowledge required to appropriately conduct a ceremony and make an offering was natural knowledge. The first kill for a young boy was given to an elder because it encouraged the motives of respect and generosity. As was mentioned earlier, this is a non-moral assumption or belief about human psychology and how to best instill, teach, or encourage particular motivations. It helped develop generosity in the hunter. Killing an animal for yourself isn’t done out of generosity and respect. However, killing an animal as quickly and painlessly as possible out of necessity for others demonstrates generosity and respect towards the animal.

Let me summarize the hunting example by using terms from earlier in the paper. All this non-moral knowledge is for the purposes of developing the right reasons or motivations when hunting, and the right reasons or motivations when hunting are generosity and respect, and these motives encourage acting in the right ways. These are the right reasons because actions done while hunting for these reasons promote harmony. Taking the life of an animal creates an imbalance of energy, but this imbalance can be minimized by killing the animal quickly and as painlessly as possible. To fix the remaining imbalance killing the animal creates, there are ceremonies and offerings made to the animal. These ceremonies and offerings are means of reciprocating to the deceased animal for giving its life for others’ survival.

**5. Concluding Remarks**

While this paper only provides a brief sketch of one tribe’s, the Muscogee’s, approach to indigenous metaethics, my hope is that it helps to highlight some distinctive features that are either lacking or under-emphasized in contemporary accounts of metaethics. Trying to explain an indigenous approach to ethics within the framework of contemporary metaethics (i.e., trying to answer questions of contemporary metaethics in indigenous terms) may lead to misconstruing the indigenous approach. For example, some distinctions in contemporary metaethics (e.g., between moral and non-moral knowledge) may not make sense when the domain of morality is so closely related the “non-moral” domain. Similarly, being unable to distinguish between the moral and non-moral domain may make it more difficult to distinguish between various competing views in metaethics (e.g., naturalism and non-naturalism, non-cognitivism and cognitivism, realism and anti-realism, etc.).

However, there are at least three implications that I think follow from the three core features of this indigenous account of metaethics. First, given the Principle of Harmony, more things are worthy of moral consideration. In contrast with social contract theories (or other metaethical accounts that place an emphasis on cooperation), moral consideration is tied to more than just rational agents. Harmony, being a more wide-ranging concept than something like cooperation, is something that would apply to the land, ecosystems, non-human animals, and collectives. While social contract theories can find indirect ways of explaining why these things get moral consideration, focusing on harmony provides a more direct explanation.

Second, harmony, unlike ‘goodness,’ is a transparently relational property. Like the concepts of ‘taller,’ ‘to the left of,’ etc., harmony requires more than just one entity.[[32]](#footnote-32) Bringing about harmony requires that there is something to be in harmony with. That’s what relationships bring about. To be in a relationship, there has to be something to be in a relationship with. The same goes for harmony. To live in harmony means there has to be something that is being lived with. Harmony, then, differs from simple, irreducible, unanalyzable properties, like G.E. Moore’s concept of goodness.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Third, the dependency of moral facts on non-normative facts differs in the kinds of natural facts that the moral facts are tied to. The degree or level of influence that non-moral facts or judgments have on moral facts or judgments differs because other naturalistic accounts don’t, for example, require the same kind of knowledge of non-human animals, plant life, the components and workings of ecosystems, interactions between plants and humans, the land, etc. This dependency is not reductive in the sense that the concept of harmony is reducible to some natural kind, phenomena, or property, but particular facts about harmony are grounded in the natural phenomena that we are born or placed in (i.e., certain kinds of situations and relationships). In this way, knowing that something is morally right or wrong requires knowing the natural world sufficiently to know how to reciprocate and bring about harmony.

While each one of these implications is only briefly mentioned here, more robust arguments would be needed to justify or substantiate these claims. However, I think these implications are interesting enough that they warrant further investigation. One of my hopes, in addition to bringing to light an indigenous, particularly Muscogee, account of metaethics, is that these implications receive more attention in discussions of contemporary metaethics.

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1. I am especially indebted to my Grandmother, Lillian Miller, for encouraging and supporting my journey to understand Muscogee culture and our family’s history. Mvto (thank you), Grandma. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have chosen to use ‘Muscogee’ to refer to members and descendants of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation because it is more familiar and easier to sound-out than other spellings/pronunciations. ‘Muscogee’ is how the people refer to themselves, and ‘Creek’ is a name given to them by colonial settlers because of their location near prominent creeks in the south eastern part of North America. The traditional Muscogee spelling is ‘Mvskoke’ (which refers to the language or the people) or ‘Mvskokvlke’ (which refers to the Creek people) (Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As an example of one aspect of the structure of Muscogee societies, Sarah Deer (2015) – in her book on sexual assault against Native women - describes the structure as consisting in a “division of various powers, functions, and privileges” along gendered roles. These roles can be considered a “nonbinary complementary dualism, wherein binary gender lines are fluid without fixed boundaries. This is evidenced by the role that Two-spirit or gender nonconforming people played. Sometimes a man would perform a woman’s role, and vice versa. In a gendered epistemology, all persons have valued roles and duties, which balance one another” (p. 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are other aspects of life where promoting harmony is important, but for the purposes of this paper I’m using the land and culture merely as two examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I’d like to say something about my place in this kind of conversation. I am an enrolled member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, but I do not claim to speak for all Muscogee peoples. Although I am an enrolled member, I did not grow up on a reservation (because our tribe doesn’t have a reservation) or in Oklahoma (where our tribe is headquartered), nor do I speak the language (my grandmother remembers pieces of the language, but she, like many others, had her language stolen from her during her school years). There are people more familiar with, who have more direct, first-hand, knowledge of Muscogee culture, but this is an opportunity where I think I can use *my* training in western philosophy (and *my* experiences) to *help* share Muscogee beliefs. I see my role in this conversation as filling in argumentative gaps. My hope is to state some core features of (mostly) pre-colonial Muscogee beliefs – features from accounts that have been gathered by other Muscogees – and show how they could be justified or explain how they can be related or connected to one another. I am not trying, or claiming, to provide new, or first-hand, knowledge of Muscogee beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In Mvskoke, the letter ‘v’ is pronounced like the letter ‘u.’ I have chosen to use the word ‘harmony’ because I think it’s the most familiar term in English that captures the concept of *etemeyaske vpokat*. It’s also the word most used by the Muscogees cited in the references. Mvto (thank you) to Rebecca Barnett at the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Mvskoke Language Program for helping me with this translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Since most American Indian history was transmitted orally, there are comparatively few first-person, written sources on Muscogee beliefs. The sources I’ll be drawing from, though few, offer a rich collection of oral stories and histories. Though only a few names will be credited in the citations, it should be noted that many more are responsible for the transmission and development of these beliefs. As Bear Heart is a healer, his knowledge of Muscogee healing and medicine was orally passed down. Joyotpaul Chaudhuri (2001), in the acknowledgements section of his and Jean Chaudhuri’s book, *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*, states, “I have depended considerably on oral history in this work. The majority of the informants as well as the primary author *(Jean Chaudhuri)* have passed away… Because many of the contributors have passed away, part of the reason for writing this work is to ensure that this body of shared knowledge does not disappear” (p. vi; emphasis mine). They go on to name many more Muscogee and Seminole elders who contributed to their ability to share this knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although I want to maintain that this is a Muscogee account without generalizing to other indigenous or American Indian/Native American accounts, there are resources that identify common themes in American Indian/Native American philosophy. These include Brian Yazzie Burkhart’s chapter in this collection, “The Groundedness of Normativity or Indigenous Normativity through the Land” as well as his book, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures*; Shay Welch’s, *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology*; Viola Cordova’s, *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*; Thomas M. Norton-Smith’s, *The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy*; and Anne Water’s collection, *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Most of the knowledge in this section comes from Chapters 2, 4, and 10 of Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri’s book, *A Scared Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*. This book as a whole has served as an invaluable resource on Muscogee beliefs and practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Additionally, Pojasa is known as ‘Grandfather Sun’ or ‘Grandfather Fire,’ Wewafulla is known as ‘Water spirit,’ Igana Jaga is known as ‘Holy Mother Earth,’ and, as was previously stated, Hesagedamesse is known as ‘The Giver and Taker (The Maker) of Breath.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri 2001, pp. 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There may be some inferences about normativity that can be drawn from the existence of *sacred* entities. In other words, the very fact that some of these things are taken to be sacred may imply that they *ought* to be treated in some ways rather than others. If this is the case, the term ‘sacred’ can be removed from the preceding explanations, and the account of Muscogee world-view or their conceptual toolbox can be seen as purely descriptive of how the world is. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This seems similar to Nietzsche’s explanation of the origin of guilt in the second treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Moral behavior is a kind of creditor/debtor relationship. When someone does something wrong, it’s as if they’re indebted to the person they wronged. Guilt arises when someone is in debt. Whereas Nietzsche was discussing the evolution of guilt and other morally relevant emotions, he wasn’t explaining the justification of any actions – i.e., he wasn’t explaining how some actions could be justified by appealing to the existence or evolution of certain emotions. As opposed to Nietzsche, I’m explaining how certain actions can be justified by appealing to harmony or reciprocity. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Waring 1960, p. 24. As cited in Deer 2015, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Deer (2015) goes on to point out, “For most of American legal history, [gendered violence] was framed as a *property* crime perpetrated against men… Yet the 1825 Mvskoke law – in the same era – ends with the phrase ‘what she say it be law.’ Somehow, despite the persistent effort and pressure to develop an American-style government and legal system, the Mvskoke law suggests a legal tradition that acknowledged the decision-making capacity of women” (p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Heart 1996, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. There may be a concern that love can come in degrees. For example, I may love a plant, but I don’t love it as much as I love my family. However, with love being a state or an action, love either exists or it doesn’t. It’s binary. Like playing basketball, you either are or are not playing basketball. It doesn’t come in degrees (e.g., you don’t play basketball *a little*). I’m inclined to think loving something is similar. You either do or don’t love something. However, how that love is expressed varies depending on the other entity involved and what kind of relationship is had with that entity. I can still love something *poorly* (e.g., by not providing care or upholding my commitments to what is loved), in the same way that I can play basketball poorly; but loving poorly still requires love to be present. So, with love being an action, it is either present or it’s not. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. One interesting implication that I won’t be exploring in this paper is whether this means that non-humans can behave rightly or wrongly; or, whether the actions of non-humans are good or bad. Since all interactions are exchanges of energy, and all exchanges of energy either promoting harmony or create disharmony, then it seems like the actions of non-humans would similarly be good or bad depending on whether they promote harmony or create disharmony. While I won’t be offering an argument in support of this claim, I’m inclined to think this is correct. In other words, I’m inclined to think that the actions of non-humans are good or bad as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In an attempt to explain how morally neutral actions could exist, it may be appealing to think that actions that promote harmony are good, actions that create disharmony are bad, and actions that merely fail to promote harmony (without creating disharmony) are neutral. However, as was just explained, since all actions involve exchanges of energy, there are no actions that merely fail to promote harmony without creating disharmony. All actions either take or reciprocate energy, thereby either promoting harmony or creating disharmony. As such, there are no actions that count as neutral. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For examples of these kinds of accounts, see Philippa Foot’s, *Natural Goodness* and Michael Thompson’s, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I take the question of normative force to be a question about why we *ought* to follow or adhere to the principle. As will be discussed in §3, this ‘ought’ can be understood morally or prudentially (i.e., it can be a moral-ought or a practical-ought). In §3 I will offer an argument for why, *prudentially*, one ought to follow the Principle of Harmony. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As opposed to Aristotelean natural law theories of, e.g., Foot (2001) and Thompson (2012), natural law theories that make reference to God (see Aquinas 2014) may not claim that natural laws are brute facts. Instead, the natural laws are issued from God. Given that the Muscogee conception of God (either Ibofanga or Hesagedamesse) is constituted by the natural world, it *could* be said that the natural laws issue from God (since Ibofanga and Hesagedamesse are part of the natural world – not removed from it). However, given these differing conceptions of God, it can also be said that the natural laws (e.g., the Principle of Harmony) are just brute facts of the natural world since they aren’t issued from a God that is removed from the natural world. Overall, like natural law theories that make reference to God, the Principle of Harmony is a normative principle that is based in the natural world, but, unlike natural law theories that make reference to God, this principle is simply a brute fact (though, again, it *could* be said to issue from divinity given the intertwinement of divinity and the natural world). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. p. 190 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. As will be explained in §3.2, this view is tied to a non-western conception of ‘self.’ Using this non-western conception of ‘self,’ we are able to offer a prudential reason to act on the Principle of Harmony. This could be seen as a kind of egoism; however, the conception of ‘self’ in this case makes it a different view than what we may normally consider ‘egoistic.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This emphasis on care is similar to some approaches in feminist ethics. As an example, see Nel Noddings’s, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This is a similar claim to Philippa Foot’s argument in *Natural Goodness*. According to Foot, moral goodness is constitutive of being good at being human. What is good for humans is objective and descriptive, and being morally good is part of what makes us good at being humans. On the account I’m explaining, living in harmony is constitutive of living well. What it means to live well, at least partly, is to promote harmony. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Although Bear Heart merely mentioned ‘existence’ and ‘survival,’ I think his claim is best understood as a claim about existing or surviving *well*. It seems plausible that someone could live for awhile without being in harmony with their surroundings. However, it’s less clear how long someone could live well without being in harmony with their surroundings. Additionally, his claim could be about our species as a whole rather than individuals (e.g., for humans to survive, they need to be in harmony with their surroundings). Presumably, this implies the survival of our species over an extended period of time – which would seemingly require, however, our species to live well. Again, it’s plausible that a species can exist for a while without being in harmony with their surroundings. As such, I think his claim is best understood about the quality of existence rather than mere quantity. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. My use of the concept of ‘self’ is meant to capture individuation. I don’t intend for ‘self’ to indicate some psychological capacity or a *sense* of self. By ‘self’ I am referring to individuals as distinct from their surroundings. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Heart 1996, p. 22. Emphasis not mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In this way, something can’t be in harmony with itself. To use the concept of health mentioned earlier, humans are healthy when the components of their bodies are balanced. In other words, when the components of our bodies are in harmony, there’s health. But, the components of our bodies can’t be in harmony by themselves. There needs to be other components to be in harmony with. We could say that are bodies are in harmony with themselves, but this would just be a way of saying that the components that make-up our bodies are in harmony with one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Moore 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)