Transformative Philosophy and Indigenous Thought: A Comparison of Lakota and Ojibwa World Views

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If the Lakota describe the atmosphere of a sweat lodge, the sacred steam, as "wakanda" and if the Ojibwa characterize it as "manitu", are we entitled to conclude that these terms mean roughly the same thing? Certainly some anthropologists have drawn just such a conclusion. The Tedlocks, for example, in their classic study, *Teachings from the American earth: Indian religion and philosophy* (1978), seem quite comfortable in equating these terms with the Western concepts of sacredness and holiness. They assert: "The Sioux call this holiness *wakan*, the Ojibwa and other Algonkian peoples call it *manitu*, and [they add for good measure] the Iroquois call it *orenda*" (Tedlock and Tedlock 1978:xviii). But care needs to be taken here. Comparing Lakota and Ojibwa world views is just as much a cross-cultural study as comparing either with various Western world views. Actually a comparison of Lakota and Ojibwa world views would be doubly cross-cultural, as it were, since any such comparative study is inevitably Western, particularly one done, or written up, in English.

In undertaking such comparative studies it is important to deal at the outset with possible objections involving the incommensurability of world views. Leroy Meyer and Tony Ramirez, two philosophers from the University of South Dakota, argue that the incommensurability problem is much more than a simple problem of translating from the Native language:

> Although translation from one disparate way of thinking to another is difficult, coming to understand another way of thinking is not a question of overcoming the difficulties of translation. Coming to understand another world view is "learning how to reason" in the style of the other world view. [Meyer and Ramirez 1996:92]

They illustrate with the Lakota concept of "Wakinyan hotan":

> When the Lakota say "Wakinyan hotan", the translator is faced with some ambiguity, to be sure. It could be rendered as "The Thunder Beings cry out!", or "The thunder speaks!", or simply "thunder!" In trying to
understand the traditional Lakota/Dakota world view, one needs to discover the network of inferential associations between the Lakota/Dakota concept of Wakinyan and the other conceptual phenomena perceived from the perspective of this particular world view. [Meyer and Ramirez 1996:92]

It is important to note that in comparing Lakota and Ojibwa world views the networks of inferential associations we are interested in are, in the first instance, those between Lakota concepts, and, in the second instance, those between Ojibwa concepts. There are no networks of inferential associations between Lakota and Ojibwa concepts except those imposed by the investigator. However, when the principal source of the incommensurability problem is understood it will be clear that there is not the radical incommensurability between Lakota and Ojibwa world views that inevitably arises between Native American and Western world views generally. In other words although the Lakota and Ojibwa languages differ, their modes of reasoning, at least, are mutually intelligible.

After careful conceptual analysis, Meyer and Ramirez characterize the traditional Lakota/Dakota world view as what they call "spiritual holism":

Reality, in the Lakota/Dakota world view, comprises one integrated spiritual whole; what might otherwise be regarded as components of that reality are inseparable manifestations of the unified whole. Furthermore, everything has spirit in some appropriate sense of that term; thus everything is ultimately of one continuous spirit. The physical appearance of "hard things" is simply one manifestation of the spiritual reality which underlies everything. [Meyer and Ramirez 1996:100]

It has been argued — erroneously we believe — that one major difference between Lakota and Ojibwa world views is that the former involves a more sacred or religious attitude toward the world. Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott has argued recently that:

Human life in nature from the perspective of the Lakota organization of experience as portrayed in Black Elk Speaks... might more accurately be characterized as religious or holy, since prayers and worshipful rites seem to figure more prominently in the Lakota ideal of human–nature relationships than in the Algonkian. [Callicott 1989:218]

We disagree. We would argue that the Ojibwa people too are a very spiritual people. Callicott (1989:218) thinks that it is misleading "to characterize the means of communication with nature spirits — dreams, visions, divination, and ceremonial — as 'religious rites', given the usual connotation of the term." Callicott seems to believe that the term "religious" necessarily has Otherworldly connotations. As Meyer and
Ramirez (1996) have shown, the Lakota world view is hardly Other-worldly: it is this world which has spiritual significance. This, we suggest, is also true of the Ojibwa world view. Discussing both dreams and the vision quest, the Ojibwa scholar James Dumont observes:

Ojibwa man is always religious man because he knows that as a ‘soul/body’ he moves about in both ordinary and non-ordinary reality. The Ojibwa is raised in this awareness from his beginning, and, realizes, further, that at the critical time of approaching independence and manhood, he must establish, once and for all, absolute contact with the spirit world. He will live the remainder of his life in a balance of these two realities. [Dumont 1976:39]

Dumont’s account is confirmed by traditional Ojibwa healer Ron Geyshick in his 1989 book Te bwe win (Truth), an interesting collection of stories Geyshick heard from elders and his own personal experiences growing up on the isolated (and hence insulated) Lac La Croix reserve in northern Ontario. It includes descriptions of Geyshick’s first vision quests (Geyshick and Doyle 1989:42). At the age of nine, when he was left alone on an island to fast for four days and four nights. His father told him to drink no water and not even to chew on twigs. If he was cold (the ice had just gone out from the lake) he was to run around the island or place a large flat rock on his chest until he warmed up. That first year he heard no spirits: “For four days and four nights, the only sound I heard was from my grumbling tummy.” He tried the vision quest again a year later. This time he was not so hungry. He reports hearing the trees talking. The third year his fasting was “full of dreams and visions”. On the fourth year he “began to travel with the spirits, around the world in four directions”. Through these experiences Geyshick says he “learned to be an Indian”. He certainly made “absolute contact with the spirit world”, as Dumont puts it. The main point is that through the vision quest one is transformed. One sees the world in a different way, in a way which has a profound influence on thought and action, in a way which makes one truly religious. As Geyshick explains, “In my stories, I try to teach young people respect for everything: other people, trees, water and the spirits. I want them to know that the Creator is in you or me” (Geyshick and Doyle 1989:31).

What both Dumont and Geyshick are describing can usefully be characterized as transformative philosophy, a concept which has proven extremely useful in cross-cultural comparisons of Western and non-Western philosophies. Taber establishes “the transformative pattern as a
distinct type of philosophy” which can be discovered in very different cultures and compared.\(^1\) He argues that we are able “to ascertain types of philosophical systems, and by contrasting systems of the same type from different cultures we are often better able to understand them” (Taber 1983:2). Taber offers the following by way of definition: “Transformative Philosophy... does not stand on its own as a theoretical edifice but requires a certain transformation in the student to be intelligible, which transformation it in turn finalizes” (Taber 1983:65). This is, perhaps, most easily explained using the 8th- or 9th-century East Indian philosopher Sankara. According to Taber:

Sankara presupposes a certain state of purification as a prerequisite of the inquiry into Brahman. This purity is marked by certain qualities which it seems proper to label “spiritual” — dispassion, tranquility, control, and so forth. It is to be cultivated by the regular observance of religious and social ritual... and by spiritual disciplines such as celibacy, austerity, meditation, and restraint of the senses. It is... associated with the concept “knowledge”... [but] it is not knowledge in the fullest sense... Rather, it is precognitive knowledge... Having, so to speak, already achieved union with Brahman on a precognitive level, the explicit statement that one is Brahman is all that is needed to precipitate a clear consciousness of that union and bring it into being as such for the first time. [Taber 1983:55]

We wish to suggest that Lakota and Ojibwa world views are best compared as types of transformative philosophy. The transformative role of traditional Lakota ceremony in putting participants in touch with their own spirituality is confirmed by Vine Deloria in *God is red*. Explaining the importance of ceremonies, Deloria suggests that “traditional Indian people experience spiritual activity as the whole of creation becomes active participants in ceremonial life” (Deloria 1994:274). He argues that we should understand that such ceremonies “act to complete and renew the entire and complete cycle of life, ultimately including the whole cosmos present in its specific realizations, so that in the last analysis one might describe ceremonials as the cosmos becoming thankfully aware of itself” (Deloria 1994:276–7). To dance at a powwow, for example, with the understanding that the dance itself is a specific realization of the whole cosmos, to think of your dancing self as “the cosmos becoming thankfully aware of itself” is to experience a transformation of consciousness, and is,

\(^1\) For a detailed account of comparative philosophy using this approach we recommend the excellent study by John Taber (1983), which is based on a doctoral dissertation at the University of Hawaii, the centre for East–West comparative work in philosophy.
in a very real sense, to be transported from the mundane to the spiritual. Only after such a transformation are we even in a position to understand the insight of Lakota spiritual holism that “everything is ultimately of one continuous spirit”.

Failure to recognize the transformative nature of these philosophies can lead to — indeed has led to — profound misunderstandings. To give but one example: Ojibwa medicine societies such as the Midewiwin are usually described (or rather misdescribed) by anthropologists as secret societies. Again we will cite the Tedlocks’ Teachings from the American earth, because it really was quite a sympathetic book in its day. They state quite categorically:

Throughout North America, there are secret societies in which holy men share the power of their visions with a group of initiates, sometimes their former patients: the Iroquois Society of the Mystic Animals, the Midewiwin of the Ojibwa, the numerous medicine societies of the Pueblos, and many others. [Tedlock and Tedlock 1978:xix]

Interestingly enough, although the Tedlocks do recognize the importance of the personal vision quest they fail to relate this form of consciousness transformation to the ability to understand the teachings of these so-called secret societies:

But it is not enough to share the visions of others. Over much of North America, young Indians are encouraged and even expected to seek their own visionary encounters with the other world. Indeed, the seeking is prerequisite for adulthood itself. In some tribes, the first attempts may be made as early as the age of five, and in most it has to be made before adolescence. [Tedlock and Tedlock 1978:xix]

Of course what the Tedlocks are reporting here is factually correct. But what is missing is any insight into the nature of the teachings of the “secret societies”: the teachings are not really secret; rather they simply cannot be understood by someone who has not undertaken the appropriate forms of purification. There is nothing mysterious or mystical about this. It is simply not having the experience necessary in order to understand what is said to you. This is exactly what is to be expected if we are dealing with a transformative philosophy. The point we are attempting to make here about the transformative nature of Ojibwa and Lakota philosophy is illustrated beautifully by Ojibwa elder Wub-e-ke-niew from the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. In his book with the chilling title We have a right to exist he makes the following quite humorous observation:
The Midé is not a secret — but enculturation into Western European civilization usually prevents people from seeing or understanding it. I have been present when Midé elders told interested and open-minded White people things about the Midé, in English, and the person to whom the elder was talking did not realize they were being told anything. [Wub-e-ke-niew 1995:8]

This brings us back to the incommensurability problem. What kind of transformations do non-Natives have to undergo in order to understand Native world views? It has long been recognized that non-Natives who take Native views seriously often experience profound emotional and psychological change. Even the Tedlocks write about “whites who have tried to hear Indians and were changed in the process” (Tedlock and Tedlock 1978:x).

Meyer and Ramirez also recognize that for most of us to understand Lakota spiritual holism fully we will have to undergo some form of transformation, though they use the term gestalt shift rather than transformative philosophy:

To say that the Lakota and Dakota see the world holistically as one spirit, is not the same as to see the world that way. For another to see the world that way would require a kind of gestalt switch involving a shift in “styles of reasoning” as well as ways of perception. It would entail responding to the world according to the exhortation: Mitakuye oyasin! — “We are all related!” [Meyer and Ramirez 1996:105]

In examining Native philosophy — in comparing Lakota and Ojibwa world views for example — what we encounter are not so much unalterable facts about particular cultures as transforming events. We suggest that the principal cause of the incommensurability problem, at least in this context, is, as Wub-e-ke-niew put it, “enculturation into Western European civilization”. More precisely it has something to do with the difference between oral and literate cultures. But even this is not sufficiently precise: Meso-American cultures had their own unique forms of writing along with an oral tradition. More precisely, then, what is it about literate cultures rooted in Western European civilization which makes it difficult for their people to come to grips with the indigenous oral traditions of North America? One possible answer to this seemingly impossible question is suggested in a recent study by philosopher David Abram entitled The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world (1996).

By way of conclusion we should like to outline this answer, and
suggest one important and rather startling implication of it. As the subtitle of Abram’s book suggests, human language developed in concert with our perceptual encounter with a meaningful, animate more-than-human world. This perceptual encounter is essentially relational and indeed interpersonal:

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth — our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. [Abram 1996:22]

It is not just the earth, including birds and animals, which, as other-than-human persons, speak to us, giving us the gift of language, but the air in which we are all immersed that is itself animate, relating us to one another both human and more-than-human. Abram gives a Lakota example:

...the sacred pipe is smoked in ritual fashion during all of the diverse Lakota ceremonies, from the sweat lodge to the Sun Dance. The pipe smoke makes the invisible breath visible, and as it rises from the pipe, it makes visible the flows and currents in the air itself, makes visible the unseen connections between those who smoke the pipe in offering and all other entities that dwell within the world: the winged people, the other walking and crawling peoples, and the multiple rooted beings — trees, grasses, shrubs, mosses... Further the rising smoke carries the prayers of the Lakota people to the sky beings — to the sun and the moon, to the stars, to the thunder beings and the clouds, to all those powers embraced by woniya wakan, the holy air. [Abram 1996:229]

Now all this sounds, to the modern Western scientific ear, like so much primitive animism, childish and simplistic. To Christian missionaries in the 19th century, and, unfortunately, to some even today, it is nothing less than heathenism, something to be eradicated, something from which people need to be saved. To counter these typically Eurocentric responses Abram asks the following questions:

If human discourse is experienced by indigenous, oral peoples to be participant with the speech of birds, of wolves, and even of the wind, how could it ever have become severed from that vaster life? How could we ever have become so deaf to these other voices that nonhuman nature now seems to stand mute and dumb, devoid of any meaning besides that which we choose to give it? [Abram 1996:91]

The answer he gives to these questions is almost as startling as the questions themselves. Our alienation from the meaningful, natural life-world of other-than-human persons is principally due, he argues, to the development and widespread application of the phonetic alphabet:

The participatory proclivity of the senses was simply transferred from the
depths of the surrounding life-world to the visible letters of the alphabet... each letter was now associated purely with a gesture or sound of the human mouth... The senses that engaged or participated with this new writing found themselves locked within a discourse that had become exclusively human. Only thus, with the advent and spread of phonetic writing did the rest of nature begin to lose its voice. [Abram 1996:138]

Finally, he argues that the invention of the printing press and “the dissemination of uniformly printed texts that it made possible, ushered in the Enlightenment and the profoundly detached view of ‘nature’ that was to prevail in the modern period” (Abram 1996:138). This profoundly detached view of “nature” is, of course, the one which many of us still unthinkingly presuppose today. That is why we fail to fully comprehend indigenous world views such as those of the Lakota and Ojibwa. That is the root of the incommensurability problem. With difficulty, however, it can be overcome; the whole point of Abram’s book is to overcome it. In fact his book can be seen as an exercise in transformative philosophy intended to help us get in touch with, and learn to respect, the living world of other-than-human persons whom our technological society is in danger of destroying. Abram is not arguing that we should give up literacy, that we should turn our backs on the written word. He is arguing rather that “the written word carries a pivotal magic — the same magic that once sparkled for us in the eyes of an owl and the glide of an otter”; he sees his task as that of “taking up the written word, with all its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land” (Abram 1996:273). To write language back into the land, to rediscover the primordial meaning of hawk, wolf, rock and wind will require a major transformation of consciousness for those of us enculturated into Western European civilization. Fortunately we have the help of contemporary indigenous peoples such as the Lakota and Ojibwa. It is little wonder that whites who have heard Indians have been changed in the process. What is sad, in this context, is that through policies of assimilation, residential schools, etc., whites have tried to change Indians. As Abram puts it:

Christian missions and missionaries were by far the greatest factor in the advancement of alphabetic literacy in both the medieval and the modern eras. It was not enough to preach the Christian faith: one had to induce the unlettered, tribal peoples to begin to use the technology upon which that faith depended. Only by training the senses to participate with the written word could one hope to break their spontaneous participation with the animate terrain. Only as the written text began to speak would the voices of the forest, and of the river, begin to fade. And only then would
language loosen its ancient association with the invisible breath, the spirit sever itself from the wind, the psyche dissociate itself from the environing air. The air, once the very medium of expressive interchange, would become an increasingly empty and unnoticed phenomenon, displaced by the strange new medium of the written word. [Abram 1996:254; italics in original]

We do not argue for Abram’s position; we have merely drawn attention to some of his conclusions. His entire book is a sustained argument in support of these conclusions. But if Abram is right — and we think he is on the right track — we see some important implications concerning the use of various writing systems, including syllabics, to maintain Native American languages and cultures. Any representation of sound by arbitrary abstract symbol runs the risk of separating language from the living land, perhaps not in the first few generations, but eventually. After all, it took over 2000 years to do it to ourselves. Alienating Native languages from the land through the introduction of such writing systems may well be the most pernicious, most potent technology of assimilation ever devised. Of course, those who devised such systems had no such intention; they only wanted to help preserve the culture. Perhaps it is time we learned that such help is neither welcome nor efficacious.

REFERENCES


