Nature in Native American Political Thinking

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ABSTRACT

Observers of North American Indigenous life and scholarship still struggle to understand Indigenous ideas and how they are politically relevant, especially regarding the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature. Even when Indigenous claims are warmly received, scholars gloss over how these accounts understand nature to be politically relevant. By looking to a range of contemporary Native American thinkers, I argue they indeed have a coherent account of the natural world differing from dominant modern Western philosophy. In four parts, I argue Indigenous thought rejects the idea that morality is solely a product of human relationships, Indigenous thinkers do not accept the is/ought distinction pervasive in modern Western philosophy, Indigenous thinkers insist meaning can be located in the existence of specific beings that in themselves constitute wholes with identifiable purposes, and the concept of "relationality" means that one of the political community's roles is to build relationships with the nonhuman world.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the marshlands of Minnesota there grows a grass that has sprouted for at least the past 12,000 years. It is called "wild rice" in English, but in the Ojibwe language the term is *Manoomin* (good berry). In 2021 the White Earth Band of Chippewa filed a suit against Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources for violating the rights of Manoomin, as outlined in a 2018 tribal law, when it permitted the gas company Enbridge to divert water away from its fields. The tribal law recognized Manoomin to be a "gift from the Creator" at risk to

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"hybridization, genetic modification, sterilization, privatization, climate change, and other industrial and corporate practices." The band declared that within its reservation Manoomin "possesses inherent rights to exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve."[1]

The band's effort is akin to others in the Anglo-Colonial world (and in Latin America) where Indigenous peoples are trying to reflect their traditional understandings in non-Indigenous law. Though the Minnesota case has yet to be resolved in court, it seems likely that the tribe will fail. No American court has upheld rights of nonhumans (Bunten 2022), and advocates of these rights acknowledge they are largely symbolic (Challe 2021). Politics in the Western liberal democratic tradition is oriented around individual persons who vote, run for office, go to court, and make claims on the government.[2] Manoomin cannot do any of these things.

The difficulty the White Earth Band has in the Manoomin case is only one instance of what often happens when Indigenous ideas conflict with non-Native peoples and governments. Some of the conflict, as has been true since North America was colonized, is a political one between the material interests of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. But why do they have different interests? As in the Manoomin case, Native American claims often involve certain ideal commitments to the natural world, commitments that non-Natives generally do not understand or accept. This is true of Indigenous sovereignty claims that hinge on Native nations describing long-term knowledge of and relations with the land on which they live (Tsilthqot'in Nation v. British Columbia, [2014] 2 S.C.R. 256; Mills 2017). It is also true of Indigenous defenses of religious freedoms on sacred sites that American courts frequently deem mere cultural practices (Dussias 1997; Barclay and Steele 2021).

The nonhuman natural world is central to Indigenous thought and life, and this fact has proven remarkably constant throughout the history of Indigenous-colonial relations in North America. Conflicts over relations with the natural world have barely let up since early modern colonizers mistook the Indigenous landscapes of New England for untouched wildernesses requiring transformation and claimed that Native peoples did not truly own the land because of this (Arneil 1992; Tully 1994; Henderson 2000; Cronon 2003; Yirush 2011). More generally inside and outside of scholarship, citizens are giving more attention

1. White Earth Reservation Business Committee, White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians, "Resolution No. 001-19-009," https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3f36df772e5208fa96513c/t/61b0fbde0f3dc509e54c6aca/1638988767140/2018+White+Earth+Rights+of+Manoomin+Resolution+and+Ordinance.pdf.

2. Corporate bodies are recognized in liberal democratic law, but these are composed of and contracted by individuals.

to North American colonialism and to understanding how and why colonial forces have dominated Native peoples.[3] Yet observers often pay less attention to Indigenous ideas and practices in their own right, instead turning them back on colonial forces and history in a critique of empire (Grosfoguel 2007; Yirush 2018, 118; Getachew and Mantena 2021; Piccolo 2023b).

This also holds in the realm of Indigenous approaches to nature. Even those who share an aim of amending contemporary human relations with the rest of nature treat the substantive understandings accompanying Indigenous treatments of nature (the rights of Manoomin being one example) as secondary (Nichols 2020, 150). For those more skeptical, such as Jeremy Waldron, Indigenous claims of special relationship to land and nonhuman nature are "ineffable" or "mystical" (2002, 82). The written work of Indigenous peoples about humans and the natural world can indeed be complex. When, to take one example, non-Indigenous readers take in Anishinahbaeójibway writer Wub-e-keniew's explanation that "if a person goes into the forest, and becomes a part of it, rather than looking at it from outside, one can start to understand what [Indigenous ideas] are about" (1995, 213), they are likely to echo Waldron's accusation of ineffability. At other points, Indigenous scholarship often takes the form of radical political proposals for contemporary life that seem distant from philosophic detail (Simpson 2017; Paradies 2020). For these reasons, much existing work on the relation between Indigenous natural philosophy and political life has centered on general observations that Indigenous thinking rejects the modern scientific view of nature as an object of control or manipulation that has led to the political domination of Native peoples. Other scholarship has lingered on empirical examples of Indigenous communities acting differently than non-Indigenous ones or argued simply that great change from the status quo is required if Native nations are to flourish.

In this article, I argue that we need a detailed philosophic understanding of Indigenous accounts of the natural world to understand why Indigenous political communities consider nature in the way they do, such as in the case of Manoomin. My focus is not on the question of rights specifically, but rather on the underlying ideas in Indigenous thinking that nonhuman nature is morally significant and interwoven with human ethical and political life.[4] In short, my question is, how is nature viewed in Indigenous thinking such that it is

3. For instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, or the Royal Commission on the status of Aboriginal Peoples. This reckoning has been less prominent in the United States, preoccupied as it is with Black American history, but nevertheless Indigenous issues are increasingly significant, as the 2016 mass protests at Standing Rock demonstrated.

4. Indeed, the term "rights of nature" is a translation into Western deontological ethics that many Indigenous thinkers may not see as wholly compatible with Indigenous ideas (Deloria 1999c, 364; McPherson and Rabb 2011, 104; Mills 2017; Burkhart 2019, 9–11).

politically and ethically relevant? Or, how must the natural world be understood for Wub-e-ke-niew's explanation to follow, or for Manoomin's flourishing to be a moral matter? By peering closely at an array of contemporary North American Indigenous thinkers, I argue that Native American understandings of nature form the basis of Indigenous political theories that aim to integrate human political life with the nonhuman natural world. I proceed in three main steps.

First, in section 2, I argue that for Native American thinking the natural world is inherently moral and humans are but one constitutive part of this intrinsic morality. In section 3, I show how Indigenous thinkers argue that Western philosophy is mistaken in attempting to understand the nonhuman natural world based on abstract laws, and I suggest that Indigenous thinkers see the natural world as being composed of many other beings that are cohesive wholes. Finally, in section 4, I show how these wholes have inherent moral meaning and purpose, meanings that are decipherable to humans via close and consistent contextual interaction. My argument is meant to be not a definitive account of Native American political thinking and nature but rather part of an ongoing conversation oriented to understanding (Tully 1995, 133). Nor do I think that my rational account of North American Indigenous philosophy exhaustively explains it, though I agree with Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and Cherokee philosopher Brian Burkhart that paying attention to the systematic elements of Indigenous thought can confront false claims that Indigenous peoples have no philosophy (Burkhart 2019, 232). This article is not an apology for Indigenous perspectives on the natural world. But I conclude by suggesting that many Native understandings may, in addition to illuminating philosophic sources of ecological damage and offering alternative directions (Green and Raygorodetsky 2010; Turner and Reid 2022), be worth putting in dialogue with some less dominant voices in contemporary non-Indigenous philosophy.

1.1. TERMS AND SCOPE

I use "North American Indigenous" and "Native American" interchangeably to refer to those with ancestral and community linkages to the first peoples of North America, following common scholarly usage (Allard-Tremblay 2019, 1). By "Indigenous thinking," I mean a tradition of contemporary philosophy inaugurated by the Standing Rock Sioux philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. in 1969 (Deloria 1969).[5] While Deloria was, of course, working within a preexisting tradition of Indigenous intellectuals, his work was instrumental in wrenching Native American political philosophy from the past and bringing it into the present.

5. I generally favor "thinking" to "thought" to avoid suggesting that there is one single "Thought" of Native Americans.

In marking Deloria as a (flexible) starting point for contemporary Native American thinking, I follow many Indigenous thinkers, including Osage scholar George Tinker, who explains that Deloria "will be a starting point for young Indian students for another hundred years as they begin their own intellectual journeys" (2006, 170; see also Fixico 2003, 78; Martínez 2019, 2). Deloria and those who follow him do not attempt to create a single uniform pan-Native perspective, since doing so would be both intellectually indefensible and disrespectful to the hundreds of Indigenous nations in North America whose differences are flattened when their uniqueness is ignored. But despite these differences in beliefs and practices, North American Indigenous scholars generally affirm that they vary much less "in the principles that underlie their philosophical beliefs" (Pierotti 2011, 5; see also Benton-Banai 1988, 4; Little Bear 2000, 77; Cordova 2007, 3; Aikenhead and Michell 2011, 72, 97).

My concern in this article is the role of nature in Native American political thought. But since the discussion of politics in Indigenous thought inevitably means an entanglement with nature beyond humans, the realm of the political in terms of speech and reasoning among human citizens depicted by, for instance, John Rawls is not the one in which I am working (Rawls 1993). Instead, my investigation goes beyond these realms to include what might be traditionally called "natural philosophy," "philosophy of nature," or even "metaphysics." In considering the relation between Native American natural philosophy and Indigenous political thought, I follow many Indigenous thinkers who insist on the centrality of metaphysical concerns when thinking about the relation between humans and nonhuman nature (Deloria 1979; Cordova 1992; Kawagley 1995; Fixico 1998, 87; McPherson and Rabb 2011; Pierotti 2011). Cherokee philosopher Brian Burkhart diagnoses a disingenuous "obsession" in avoiding metaphysical language, disingenuous because all philosophy assumes fundamental principles beneath it even if they remain implicit (2019, 149).[6] To begin, I establish the role of moral naturalism in Indigenous thinking and its political relevance for Indigenous thought.

2. NATIVE AMERICAN THINKING AND A MORAL UNIVERSE

In this section, I argue that North American Indigenous thinkers posit a connection between the nonhuman natural world and human political life because

6. There are some Indigenous scholars who would disagree with Burkhart—indeed, it was the work of Mississippi Ojibwe and Mdewakanton Dakota scholar Scott Lyons that in part prompts this comment from Burkhart (Lyons 2010).

they understand the world to be fundamentally moral. In the words of Brian Burkhart, this constitutes a form of "moral naturalism" (2019, 293; see also Aikenhead and Michell 2011, 69, 76). To recall Wub-e-ke-niew's words about the forest, or the White Earth Band's inclusion of Manoomin, Indigenous thinking can see humans in a forest as part of it because their very being is attached to its natural morality.

In Native American thinking, the fact that the world is fundamentally moral means foremost that morality is not simply a feature of human relations. Of course, relations among humans and between humans and the rest of nature are moral, but the moral nature of the world goes beyond these interactions because morality is inherent to the world—not provided by the presence of humans (Cajete 2015, 47). As Deloria writes, "The universe is a moral universe. . . . In the moral universe, all activities, events, and entities are related" (1999c, 46–47), that is, related by their shared participation in the world's moral direction. Because the universe is inherently moral, it is possible for humans to look to it when we undertake moral considerations, and this is why Kahnawake political theorist Taiaiake Alfred argues that in most Indigenous understandings "nature and the natural order are the basic referents for thinking of power, justice, and social relations" (2002, 470).[7]

Because the nonhuman world is fundamentally moral, it is a place where humans can look to better understand morality and to learn lessons and practices that will better help them act in the proper manner. Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows explains that Indigenous peoples draw guidance from "what they see in the behavior of the sun, moon, stars, winds, waves, birds, animals, and other natural phenomena" (2016, 94–95). And in the Woodlands Cree tradition, Herman Michell likewise explains that "nature provides a blue print of how to live well and all that is necessary to sustain life" (2005, 39). Drawing guidance from the world is possible because morality pervades the world, and this guidance is desirable because humans are bound up in this moral order and have a particular role to play in it.

Just because the natural world is a referent for human life does not mean that it is a wholly external point of reference. In Indigenous thinking, humans are fundamentally part of the natural order. But many parts of Indigenous thinking appear to suggest that humans have characteristics that in some ways render us distinct. For instance, Borrows recounts a traditional Cree story in which the Creator speaks to nonhuman animals before humans are formed. The Creator tells the animals that they will need to be "teachers" to humans,

7. For a brief discussion of nature and law in Indigenous thinking, see Piccolo (2023c).

because humans—unlike other animals—are "not born knowing and understanding" who and what they are. Yet the Creator says also that humans will have the distinct capacity to dream and "invent great things," as well as "the gift of the knowledge of Truth and Justice" (Borrows 2010a, 120–21). As I see it, Borrows's story suggests that humans are part of the natural order but cannot access it in an unmediated way. They need to take in information from the world around them first and deliberate on what they have encountered.

Humans should understand the world because it helps us understand "the proper road along which . . . individuals [are] supposed to walk," or a clear moral direction (Deloria 1999c, 46; see also Deloria 1999b, 47). This means that engaging with the natural world and its nonhuman beings provides humans not simply with abstract or instrumental knowledge of their surroundings but with insights concerning how to act correctly in relationship with human and nonhuman nature alike (Simpson 2017, 150–54). Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson (2016) have articulated an account of Indigenous ethics that they term "grounded normativity." The "grounded" part emerges from engagement with the natural world—and in Coulthard's words, this is so because understanding nature provides "an ontological framework for understanding relationships" (2014, 60).

How is it that both humans and the rest of the natural world are inherently moral in Native American thought? I would like to suggest that an answer lies in Indigenous thinkers' understanding of the human—and the human mind—as continuous with the rest of the world, not separate from it, and their conviction both that we can gain true knowledge of the world and that this knowledge has normative implications. This means that Indigenous thought rejects several dominant commitments of modern Western philosophy. I will lay out these commitments in broad terms before showing how Native thinkers reject them. I move in this order not because Indigenous thinking is derivative of non-Indigenous philosophy but because I expect readers to have more familiarity with the latter and the contrast might help make Indigenous thinking clearer.

The standard modern position on our knowledge of the world comes out of the Humean tradition, taken up in German philosophy by Immanuel Kant.[8]

8. This epistemological tradition is far from the only one in modern philosophy. In the twentieth century, for instance, there were various approaches to philosophy that rejected Kantianism, including German phenomenology and its Anglosphere siblings by figures such as Donald Davidson (see Davidson 2006). I focus on the Humean-Kantian tradition here, though, because it is both the dominant force in modern epistemology and the one with which Native American scholars typically contrast their own approaches to epistemology (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Wildcat 2009; Aikenhead and Michel 2011; Burkhart 2019). There are also many thinkers across the Western tradition who do not reject moral naturalism

In short, this thesis suggests that the human mind—and especially its capacity for reason—is what makes the world appear ordered. Humean philosophy begins with causation skepticism. For Humeans, all claims about the relationships between physical phenomena in the world rely on past observations. For instance, while playing a game of snooker we observe that when the cue ball strikes a red ball the red ball is propelled forward. While these observations might lead me to suggest that the cue ball causes the red ball to move, the Humean skeptic insists otherwise. Claiming causality based on past observations is an argument by induction, meaning that we are inducing (i.e., projecting) future occurrences based on events in the past. But according to Humeans, the principle of induction itself relies on induction, meaning that it is not externally valid (Ayer 2000, 68–91). What we are left with is not causation but simply the reliable production of an outcome. "There is no *objective* rhyme or reason to the causal order but only the regularity that the mind creates and projects onto the world," as one philosopher summarizes the Humean account (Feser 2019, 35). The mind is engaged in creating order, not apprehending it. This is the fulcrum of Hume's famous argument that an "ought" cannot be derived from "is": because we do not really have knowledge of what the "is" is.

If we have no true access to causation in the physical world, for reasons of Humean skepticism I have just sketched, then it is clear how considerations of nature and morality operate in separate realms. In this picture, we do not have access to true statements about the physical world, only our mental accounts of the physical world. Science can use tools to measure these brute facts about the world, whereas values occurring in minds cannot be measured or appraised from appearances. Immanuel Kant takes up Hume's arguments about causality, but rather than arguing that truly understanding causality is impossible, Kant claims that "we bestow" it—and other categories, including space and time—on reality by way of transcendent reason (Hösle 2017, 63; see also Bowie 2003, 15–16). This is the famous point from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: we cannot know reality "'as it is in itself,' only how we *conceive* of it" (Lowe 2008, 276). This human reason, or the "noumenal self," is not a part of nature (Kant 2015, 79). Thus, in Humean and Kantian philosophy we are interpreting not

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and may hold positions more similar to the Indigenous thinking I outline in this article, and I turn back to these alternative accounts in the conclusion. Further, there are many figures in the realm of critical theory who offer deep critiques of the rationality of modern science and philosophy. These critiques often overlap with Native American perspectives. But unlike Native American thinkers, critical theorists typically avoid providing their own positive understandings of humans and the natural world. (Many of the Native American thinkers I study focus on dominant elements of modern philosophy rather than the internal differences.)

the world itself but our mental representations of the world.[9] Oughts are for the realm of minds discussing morals and ideals.[10]

Indigenous thinkers tend to reject this approach to philosophy (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 23–30). Indeed, Indigenous thinkers contrast their thought to such a position and insist that we do not bestow on reality its meaning in terms of both physical causality and moral significance. Deloria, for instance, argues that because humans—including humans' minds—are a part of the world just as all other things, it is hardly surprising that we have the capacity for understanding reality in itself beyond our own representations. He writes, "What Westerners miss is the rather logical implication of the unity of life. If all living things share a creator and a creation, is it not logical to suppose that all have the ability to relate to every part of creation?" (Deloria 1990, 90; see also Battiste and Henderson 2000, 10, 25). Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation, argue that Western philosophy is fundamentally incomplete because of its radical distinction between facts and values—a distinction that comes about as a result of Hume's initial separation of physical reality and our mental representations of it (Wildcat and Deloria 2001, 47). Wildcat himself says explicitly that "hard-fact skeptics will likely ridicule" Indigenous thought's commitments on this front (2009, 75).

What Deloria and Wildcat are getting at here is that facts and values, or "ises" and "oughts," are not separated in Indigenous philosophy because physicality and morality are not fundamentally separate realms. Their account is echoed by Inuvialuit law professor Gordon Christie. In making the case for a "naturalistic" approach to understanding legal orders, Christie writes that he begins "with the presumption that a realist metaphysics should be adopted." Realist metaphysics, he says, is "joined at the hip" to a "naturalist epistemology," which entails a commitment to the idea that "the world exists around us, and that the human mind *arose within* this larger natural setting. Mental states, then, are approached (at least initially) as elements of the natural world" (Christie 2019, 154). Christie is careful to stipulate that he is not trying to make

9. That said, what exactly Kant means is not entirely clear, as he seems to suggest that scientific inquiry and moral inquiry are only possible if there are genuine unities and ends in nature. In his third *Critique*, for instance, Kant does not reject the idea of teleology and inner purposiveness of beings. But as Vittorio Hösle explains, for Kant such inner forms possess only a "regulative, not a constitutive role." For Kant, all organic or physical teleology or essence "points . . . toward reason." Without reason and the morality that comes from its logic, "the purposefulness of organisms is without value" (Hösle 2017, 80).

10. Certainly, this picture becomes more complicated with G. W. F. Hegel's objective idealism (as opposed to Kant's subjective idealism). I do not go into Hegelianism and its influences here because I do not have the space and Indigenous thinkers do not explain their thinking in contrast to Hegel as they do in contrast to Hume and Kant.

a priori claims "in the sense of axioms that serve in some absolute sense to fix what follows." But his approach does entail "posteriori commitments," especially "the position that the human arises within a mind-independent natural world" (155). I take Christie to mean that he is not wading into the fraught waters of metaphysical debates with rigid claims, but he does think that these tentative naturalistic commitments are helpful to understanding law and consistent with Indigenous philosophic understandings. While the former is outside my scope here, my point in putting him alongside Deloria, Wildcat, and others is that he is right about the latter.

In this section, I have argued that Indigenous political thought understands morality to be present in the natural world and that this understanding includes a rejection of the is/ought separation foundational to the dominant strand of modern Western philosophy. While Wub-e-ke-niew's forest merely "is" to the Humean skeptic, to Indigenous thinkers it is both an is and an ought. In the next two sections, I will show how Indigenous philosophy brings beings and their purposes, and subsequently moral judgments, into the physical material world. But what I have tried to outline here is how such a connection between morality and physicality is possible at all for Native thinkers. They maintain a metaphysical account of the world in which mind is fundamentally connected to physical reality, insofar as the subjective experiences of beings are part of reality. By doing this, Indigenous thinking argues against the separation of mind and reality in the Humean-Kantian tradition. Rational minds cannot endow the world with morals because rational minds are of the world, and so any morality that rational minds encounter is already in the world to begin with. Indigenous thinkers are physical realists in that they argue that what we consider to be the world is actually the world and not simply a representation of it. And they are also moral realists in that they argue that values are fundamentally a part of physical reality (Burkhart 2019, 258, 293).

Next, I turn to just what reality Native thinkers believe is important.

3. BEINGS AND PURPOSES IN THE NATURAL WORLD

In this section, I argue that Indigenous philosophy of nature sets itself apart from a "fundamentalist" metaphysics that relies on reducing things to elementary particles that obey abstract and universal physical laws (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 20–30; Aikenhead and Michell 2011, 51–60). Its positive account of the world has three primary elements. First, understanding requires close attention to the behavior of beings in their contexts or environments, attention that allows us to see the natural agency of beings. Second, there are whole beings in these environments with characteristics irreducible to their elementary parts. Third, Indigenous natural philosophy suggests that these beings

have internal principles—varyingly termed "souls" or "essences" or "spirits"—that give them their animacy and power.

Indigenous thinkers tend to describe natural philosophy as being based on the principle of "locality," as when Burkhart writes that "locality is a metaphysical fact" (2016, 6; 2019, xvii; see also Cordova 1992; Cajete 2000; Pierotti 2011). Indigenous thinkers maintain that the world is intelligible, but that it is best explained by sustained interaction with local particularities, not by abstract, universal laws.

Indigenous thinkers writing about natural philosophy explicitly contrast their theories with the physical laws of dominant modern science, and this contrast is the easiest way to begin consideration of North American Indigenous natural philosophy. Of course, Indigenous natural philosophy is not at root a reaction to a modern scientific way of understanding the world. While the contrast is helpful, Indigenous thought is rooted in traditions of philosophy that long predate modern science, existing before Europeans arrived on American shores, and that Native American scholars of today aim to articulate in some way in the written work they publish (Turner 2006).

This law-based metaphysical account of the world should be familiar to anyone who recalls their secondary school science curricula. Emerging during the Enlightenment, and especially within the work of René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Isaac Newton, the law-based vision claims that the movement of objects is governed by mathematical and physical rules that apply across time and space. This idea is depicted in the Flammarion image, a wood engraving often interpreted as dramatizing the contrast between the world of appearances and the gears and mechanisms whirring about in the background producing these appearances (see fig. 1).

Since Descartes's epoch, the metaphysically dominant view is that we must poke our head beyond the world of appearances to understand the rules that govern what we see (Cottingham 2020, 94–95). Examples of such rules include Newton's laws of motion and gravity. The key assumption in this metaphysics is that all things in the world are composed of and reducible to elementary particles, particles that everywhere and always obey the same physical laws. These laws run in the background like the ticking of a clock, ordering the arrangements of elementary particles that compose the nonelementary things we encounter.

This assumption means that modern science generally attempts to understand the world by attempting to break things down into smaller and smaller parts, until finding elementary particles that behave according to laws. For Newton, these elementary particles were atoms. Later, with the discovery of subatomic particles, elementary particles became the protons and electrons, only to be followed by quantum theory's explanations of the behavior of

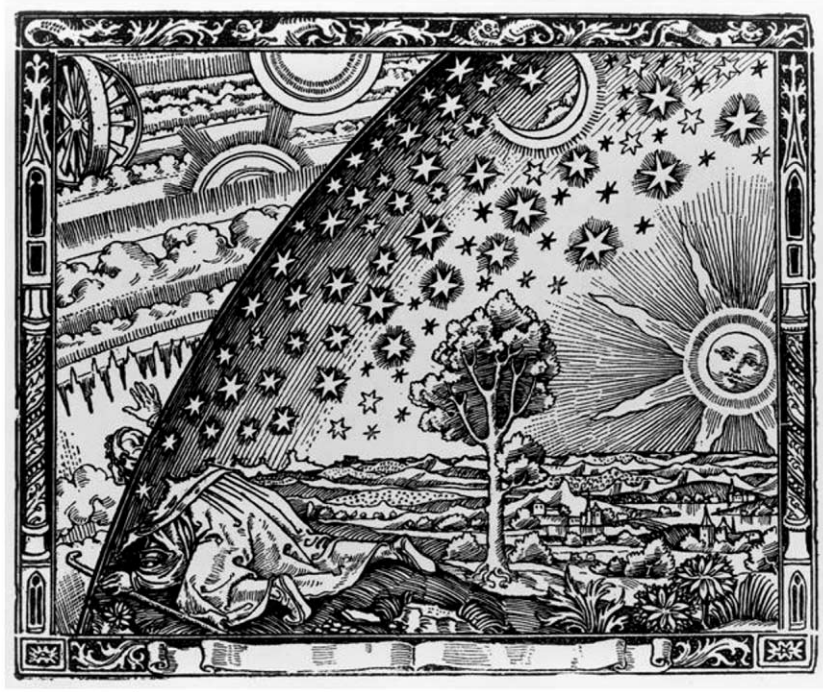

Figure 1. The Flammarion image (date unknown, first known appearance 1888) is often interpreted as dramatizing the contrast between the world of appearances and reality.

sub-subatomic particles like gluons and quarks. As physicist Paul Davies writes, the laws are considered "immutable, eternal, infinitely precise mathematical relationships that transcend the physical universe, and were imprinted on it at the moment of its birth from the 'outside' . . . it is assumed that the physical world is affected by the laws, but the laws are completely impervious to what happens in the universe" (2010, 70–71). It is clear why Burkhart calls this metaphysical account of the world "delocal" (2019, 4).

These laws, as Davies writes, are not affected by the universe or where any given thing happens to be. They are delocalized and universal, applying everywhere all at once. Proponents of elementary particles and laws, such as Alex Rosenberg, assert that "there are just fermions and bosons and combinations of them" (2011, 179). While Rosenberg and others do not deny that we encounter things aside from fermions and bosons (for all but a few laboratory scientists we encounter everything but fermions and bosons), their claim is that all other things are explicable with reference to these elementary particles and the constant laws that govern their behavior. The world really is these elementary particles. All movement, moreover, can be explained by the action

of forces external to the things doing the moving (Bryan 2002). In contemporary metaphysics this law-based account of the world is typically called "fundamentalism," the idea that "the laws of a (hypothetical) unified physical theory exhaustively govern all of material reality" (Teh and Lanao 2018, 15). It remains "hypothetical" because its proponents do not claim to have discovered all the laws that govern material reality, merely that they have discovered many of them that will—or at least could—be part of a "Final Science" or "True Physics" (17). Yet while its specifics remain hypothetical, most scientists affirm the conditions that make the hypothetical possible.

Foremost, Indigenous scholars critique the inability of physical laws to make any sense of qualitative matters, especially relationships among beings. By seeking ever more abstract theories, law-based metaphysics becomes ever more removed from the qualitative experience of life as it is lived by embodied beings—and consequently comes to see all parts of nature as "a mass of dead matter for manipulation and gain" (Cajete 2000, 212; see also Cajete 1994, 80). In Deloria's words, this is a pathology that insists that "by continual subdivision of any problem we can reach a certain and ultimate knowledge," which he suggests became especially endemic in Western society with the works of Descartes, Leibnitz, and Newton (1999a, 137–38). To Leroy Little Bear, this pathology leads to scientific efforts to isolate things and particles in austere scenarios for experimentation (2000, 79). But human life, and especially the lives of Indigenous people, is always lived in a particular place with particular things, not in the realm of abstract, universal rules. In Burkhart's telling, the arrival of metaphysical delocality in North America was a primary factor in the attempted destruction of the relationships Indigenous peoples had with the land and nonhuman nature.

Burkhart connects the idea of universal laws governing reality to John Locke's theory of property, wherein to have title to land one must work that land and alter its condition. Locke's theory, Burkhart argues, follows from a commitment to delocal laws because it assumes that all land is interchangeable for any other given the appropriate amount of labor. There is nothing essentially particular about any bit of land because there is nothing essentially particular about anything in the world, governed as it is by rules that hang above. Writes Burkhart, "After the locality of land is obscured, then an individual from Europe can come to America and re-create his or her European locality on this land . . . for both Locke and Hegel, it is not mere farming that is necessary to 'tame' American 'wilderness.' It is the act of appropriating or removing the locality of the land that allows it to become mine, for it to be incorporated into my human subjectivity or dominated by my subjectivity in some way" (2019, 41–42). But America was not Europe. Burkhart writes that all land has particular powers, and the land in America had—and has—its own locality

that Indigenous peoples understood and related to through sustained observation and interaction over many generations. Burkhart also connects this effort to radically transform land based on delocal laws with the efforts to radically transform Indigenous peoples based on delocal laws. As we well know, colonizers in the United States and Canada went to great lengths to try to make Indigenous peoples "white," forcing them into reservations, taking their children and educating them solely in Western ways, and outlawing traditional cultural practices (Deloria 1969, 172; Coulthard 2014, 95; Joseph 2018). Indigenous thought cannot abide by a delocal metaphysics, then, not only because its philosophy insists that particular places have specific powers and characteristics but also because of the way in which a commitment to abstract and universal laws played a role in colonial efforts to extinguish the particularity of their nations and impose a uniform culture on them.

Burkhart uses a traditional Indigenous narrative to make his point. In "What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us," Burkhart recounts Plato's narrative of Thales in the *Theaetetus*. (Coyote often represents the "trickster" figure in Native American traditions.) While looking up at the sky, Thales falls down a well, and in Plato's account Thales is mocked because "he was eager to know the contents of heaven, but didn't notice what was in front of him, under his feet" (Plato 1973, 174a7). To Burkhart, this tale could have easily come from Indigenous traditions, with Thales replaced by Coyote: "Coyote, like Thales, is made fun of for his actions, actions that arise from his dislocation *vis-à-vis* the world around him. . . . Like Thales, Coyote has forgotten the simple things. He has forgotten his relations. He has forgotten what is behind him and at his feet" (2004, 15–16).

Coyote and Thales search for abstract, universal knowledge since they seek what goes on in the heavens. Because of this focus, they are unable to see that the terrain around them and their relations with it are the most important things—unable to see until they fall into a hole because of their lack of attention. Similarly, we err in attempting to describe the world as abstract laws when we do not realize that the laws only apply to the particular circumstances in which they were discovered. So far in this section, I have shown how Indigenous natural philosophy critiques modern law-based metaphysics. Now I turn to Indigenous thought's positive understanding, unsurprisingly the opposite of the abstract-law-based approach.

Indigenous thinkers reject the law-based efforts of modern science I discussed in the previous section as not only untrue but also complicit in a way of regarding nature to be dominated and controlled by humans. If all things in nature are finally reducible to their elementary particles, and if these particles obey knowable laws, all nature can be manipulated once the laws are known. Countless Indigenous philosophers levy this charge against modern

Western science, though Gregory Cajete puts it succinctly when he writes that "Western science is committed to increasing human mastery over nature, to go on conquering until everything natural is under absolute human control." From this perspective the right scientific principles can solve all present problems once they are unearthed: "when we have fusion power, when we farm the oceans, when we can turn weather on and off, when all things natural can be controlled, everything will be just fine" (Cajete 2000, 16–17).

In contrast, Cajete explains, "Native science focuses its attention upon subtle, inner natures, wherein lie the rich textures and nuances of life" (2000, 16–17). Native science, often called traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), does not rely on the creation of nomological machines to isolate parts of things to make the world intelligible. Instead, TEK comes out of "careful long-term observation of natural phenomena" (Pierotti 2011, 9; see also Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005, 12). Deloria refers to the practices of his Sioux nation to show how this occurs. Any given plant must be observed for a long while, to see when it blossoms and fruits, how many of each typically appear, what colors it acquires during the year, how it changes in different seasons, and how all the animals in the ecosystem interact with it (Deloria 1999c, 53). All of this seems similar enough to how modern scientists would go about understanding such a plant, but the key difference is that TEK does not assume that the behavior of the plant in its environment is somehow epiphenomenal or determined by the microscopic operations of its cells.[11]

For TEK, the truth is that plants' behavior cannot be explained by reference to its constituent parts because it is a being greater than the assembly of those microscopic operations. Whole things have powers in Indigenous thought, powers to exist—and continue to exist—that propel the function of its constituent parts, not the other way around. The importance of wholes in Native thinking is why, when discussing conflict between Indigenous students and teachers of Western science, Viola Cordova recounts one Native student telling her that "they keep taking things apart and I keep trying to put them back together again" (1992, 50; see also Aikenhead and Michell 2011, 51). The Indigenous student would go about her study by visiting the bird's home and watching "its behavior within the totality of that habitat" (Cordova 1992,

11. Of course, there are various divisions within modern Western science (biology, ecology, zoology, microbiology) that do not aim to reduce themselves to some other, more focused field of study (i.e., zoology does not try to reduce itself to biology, and biology does not try to reduce itself to microbiology). Nevertheless, this antireductionism generally only holds within specific disciplines. The broad trend of modern science appears to be toward ever smaller units of analysis, and efforts at finding a unified physical theory of the world depend on these ever-smaller units. And disciplines such as biology and zoology are generally considered subordinate to the master sciences of chemistry and physics.

52). It is no use seeing how a bird's parts work without reference to its whole, and it is no use seeing how it behaves without reference to how it interacts with its natural environment. At times it appears as though this emphasis on wholes in Indigenous thought extends so far as to obviate the study of individuals at all, focusing instead on entire ecosystems. But it is clear in the work of many thinkers that each being has an essence, which, while incomprehensible without relation to its environment, nevertheless determines the specific powers and agency of that being.

Indigenous biologist Robin Kimmerer relates the structure of the Potawatomi language to broader philosophy, which she calls the "grammar of animacy." In Potawatomi, many things are animate—"beings that are imbued with spirit." There are far fewer inanimate objects, Kimmerer writes, usually "objects that are made by people" (2017, 132). Each animate being has a spirit that provides its powers and capacities. This means that all beings with spirits, or beings that are wholes, are agents. Citing an Indigenous elder, Donald Fixico writes that each animal—and by extension other agents—has its own "power" (2003, 6). This phrase is echoed by Seneca scholar John Mohawk: "The oak tree is a manifestation of the Oak Tree Spirit. That power alone can come to be an oak tree" (2010, 8). Like Cordova, Mohawk makes clear that an oak tree cannot be considered entirely in isolation since it requires its surroundings to grow in the first place, but it remains a "powerful spirit" (8).

Though he uses forms of natural beings primarily as an analogy for legal orders, Anishnaabe legal scholar Aaron Mills makes similar comments to those of Mohawk, describing how different types of trees are both limited and given freedom by their forms, in their capacities to grow and develop in certain ways (Mills 2019, 41). Quoting another scholar approvingly, Cajete writes that even insects are animated beings, "with an anima, a soul; not a human soul, but a thing of marvelous beauty" (2000, 154; see also Borrows 2010a, 85). In referring specifically to Lakota thought, Cajete says explicitly that this spiritual concept is similar to the Western concept of "souls" (1994, 142). Anishnaabe scholar Basil Johnston, along the same lines, explains that beings are made up of physical matter and "an incorporeal substance" (1990, 33). The words of Kimmerer, Deloria, Cajete, Mohawk, Johnston, and others appear repeatedly throughout work by Indigenous thinkers.[12] In this light, we can see more clearly what the White Earth Band of Chippewa are saying when they describe Manoomin. It is a natural being with its own form and power.

12. Some diverge from this account. Nuu-chah-nulth educator Richard (Umeek) Atleo, for instance, indicates in one place that differences among forms are matters of outward clothing, not essence (2004, 61–62), though Atleo elsewhere compares these forms to Platonic ideals, which would seem to imply the opposite (xvi).

Likewise, in Indigenous thought, there are things that are not natural beings. Most obvious among these things are the elemental parts of things that Western science tends to take as primary. Electrons, protons, neutrons, and bosons are not natural wholes. Things made by people tend not to be wholes because they are constructed instrumentally and are not natural—though, as Kimmerer (2017) explains, some human-made things such as drums are beings, at least for the Potawatomi people.[13] John Borrows writes that the Anishnaabe classify the world into "things which are living and those which are not," but that the living do not always mirror what non-Indigenous people consider nonliving (2010b, 105). Given that different Indigenous nations consider some things to be agents or beings that others do not, there is some variance in what are considered agents. But my point is that Indigenous philosophy is generally united around the idea that some things in the world are natural wholes with internal natures and some things are not.

These natural wholes are animate agents in Indigenous thought, and understanding the world requires understanding the behavior of these natural agents, especially how they act in relation to each other. As Burkhart explains, "all relations are relations between agents" (2019, 293), meaning that the behavior of beings vis-à-vis other beings is of the utmost importance. The term Indigenous thinkers use for the internal wholistic principle of these agents (generally speaking, humans, nonhuman animals, plants, trees, and certain parts of the landscape) varies from "spirit" (Kawagley 1995, 11; Deloria 1999c, 58) to "power" (Mohawk 2010, 8) to "intrinsic essence" (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 25, 37; Cajete 2004, 55) to "nature" (Cajete 2000, 17) and even "soul" (Napoleon 2009, 126; McPherson and Rabb 2011, 80) or "soul-spirit" (Johnston 1990, 33). Despite the difference in phrasing, these words describe the same general phenomenon: an internal immaterial principle of organization (spirit, essence, soul, nature, etc.) that unifies the parts into a whole and that is not quantitatively measurable.

After describing how Indigenous thinkers distinguish their thought from dominant modern natural philosophy, in this section I outlined three main parts of Indigenous thought's positive metaphysics: (1) a focus on understanding through the behavior and relationships of particular beings in their environment, not delocal laws; (2) a conviction that animate beings (which include not simply humans or animals) are agents with specific powers general to their kind of being; and (3) that all natural agents have an immaterial

13. According to Kyle Mallott, senior language specialist for the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, no one knows why some things are considered animate and others considered inanimate in the Potawatomi language. Rocks larger than a fist are considered animate, while ones smaller are not. Thanks to Kyle for explaining this to me in a Potawatomi language class in 2022.

internal principle that organizes the agent's physical parts and constitutes it as a whole, varyingly termed "spirit," "power," "essence," "nature," or "soul." These principles set up the argument of section 4, which explains how such beings are morally relevant for Indigenous political thought.

The contrasts I have been outlining between Indigenous thinking and dominant strands of modern Western philosophy are not the only ones that can or should be made. I would like to briefly acknowledge alternatives to how I chose to bring Native American ideas into greater focus. While I centered on modern Western science and philosophy as it is described by researchers, the average non-Indigenous citizen of Canada or the United States probably does not think of the world in the language of Hume, Kant, or fundamentalist physics. If we are to judge by the frequency of appeals to "nature" or what is "natural" in mainstream political discourse, we would be right to suspect that most non-Indigenous North Americans are some sort of moral naturalists. Yet regular non-Indigenous communities tend not to interact with nonhuman nature as Indigenous communities do, suggesting that what differs among them may not be a commitment to moral naturalism. I understand that comparing Indigenous practices and thinking with general populations as opposed to philosophical perspectives (as I have done) is a legitimate path of inquiry. Such an avenue might appear even more apt when we remember that the account of modern science/philosophy I have given here is far from ubiquitous even in universities. Many academic disciplines do not think of the world in terms of "fundamentalist metaphysics." Indeed, when zoologists study the behavior of humpback whales, they do not think of the whales as collections of subatomic particles.

Yet I maintained my contrast between Indigenous thinking and a philosophy reflected in figures like Hume and Kant, as well as modern physics, for two primary reasons. First, as I have noted repeatedly in this article, it is a contrast that Indigenous thinkers themselves frequently make, and one that is made easier because we can refer to specific, bounded texts. Since one of my main intentions is to contribute to better understanding of Indigenous ideas, following the lead of the Indigenous scholars I cite and looking to these texts of modern philosophy offers a solid ground for contrast.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, there is a real connection between the modern philosophy I have detailed here and the perspectives of the general population even if most people may not articulate their ideas in the same way. The dominant convictions of modern philosophy matter. The absence of moral naturalism in modern philosophy is typically connected to the idea that the natural sciences are "value-free." Seeing the natural world as "value-free" means that when modern scientists and philosophers make decisions about how students are trained in universities, the sort of research that happens

there, and how the results of research are applied, these decisions are made in part because of their understanding of where moral matters are and are not present. These convictions also determine how the disciplines are arranged and what in these disciplines is taught to students when they enter university and then are sent back into the world. The products of modern science and philosophy, whether these are physical things, information, or students formed by an education, are indelibly affected by dominant views of how modern philosophy understands the world (Snow 1959; Shapin 2007).

Even if popular discourse may well appear committed to a form of moral naturalism, the dominant intellectual forces in society have no such commitment. (The fact that popular discourse retains this language could be indicative of the practical necessity of some form of moral naturalism, but this is not my concern in this article.) I do not mean to imply that differing philosophic perspectives on the natural world are the only way in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities vary, or the sole reason why colonialism has occurred. My philosophic emphasis should not replace more empirical studies and comparisons of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and their relations to nature. But it can provide a philosophic framework for such studies, especially for those in political theory committed to the primacy of ideas.

4. PHYSICAL AND MORAL PURPOSES IN INDIGENOUS THOUGHT

In Indigenous philosophy, I have argued, the world is not determined by abstract and universal physical laws. Instead, reality's intelligibility lies at the level of beings and their relations to each other, and to understand the world we must pay attention to these beings and their behavior. While these beings are composed of parts, they have an ordering unity (a nature or an essence) that means that their wholeness is something greater than their individual parts, which is why Indigenous thought does not seek to break things down into ever-smaller elementary particles. In this section, I argue that in Indigenous thought natural beings also have purposes that are comprehensible based on the forms of agency that specific beings have.[14] The presence of these purposes in physical beings demonstrates how morality and values are fundamentally a part of Indigenous natural philosophy and set up the relevance of all natural beings, such as Manoomin, to Indigenous political thought.

North American Indigenous thinkers most frequently use the word "purpose" or "forces" to describe these immaterial parts of things, including the

14. For details on purposes in Indigenous thought in a different context, see Piccolo (2023a).

immaterial part of human beings. Lakota scholar Joseph Marshall III argues that every "form of life" has a "*place* and a *purpose*" (1995, 228; see also Pierotti 2015, 81). In saying "purpose," they appear to suggest not that beings are unpredictable bundles of stimuli simply reacting to their environments, but rather that individuals of a species have a "structure, behavior, and lifestyle particular to" their kind. Individuals' structure, behavior, and lifestyle are organized around the pursuit of some purpose, a purpose primarily constituted by the thing's way of being, but also in concert with the beings with which it is surrounded, and knowledge of these purposes is what allows us to understand the environment around us. To Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste and Chickasaw lawyer Sákéj Henderson, these "intrinsic essences" are necessary for the world to be intelligible at all (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 25, 121; see also Aikenhead and Michell 2011, 89).

When Native American thinkers describe action, they are usually describing actions by particular beings, and so they infrequently speak of agency and personhood in the abstract. But they do often group capacities and purposes by reference to natural kinds and suggest that kinds should not try to appropriate the capacities of other kinds. Deloria approvingly repeats Sitting Bull's comment that "it is not necessary that eagles be crows," highlighting the diverse sorts of agency that actually exist in the world (1999c, 51). Each species has different capacities, and they need not try to acquire the capacities of others. John Mohawk describes something similar when he writes about oak trees: only the spirit (or nature, or essence) of an oak tree has the power to become an oak—to begin as an acorn, to exist in the right environment and in the right relations with it, and to achieve its potential by growing into an oak (2010, 8). Numerous North American Indigenous thinkers describe different forms of life as "clans" or "nations," including different types of plants and animals (Marshall 1995, 227; Battiste and Henderson 2000, 68; Simpson 2017, 24). These different forms are united as a clan or nation by their spirit, which Battiste and Henderson describe as "giving rise to the living organism that contains it" (2000, 76).

Likewise, in Gregory Cajete's telling, all living beings engage with and perceive the world in some manner, but the particular abilities and experience of each being—that is, their potentials—are different owing to the attributes of their kind. Viola Cordova appears to agree with Cajete when she writes about humans' capacities unique to our kind. Cajete writes that humans "share a species-specific experience and knowledge of nature" because "our perceptions are different from other species due to our unique physical biology" (2000, 25). One of our species' most distinctive potentials and purposes is an ability to alter the way we act. Other beings possess this capacity to some degree, but far from the way that we do (Cordova 2007, 151). With Navajo philosophy

as her focus, Cordova outlines the differences between potentiality and actuality of human purpose. "The normal state of affairs of a human being is to act correct, i.e., to act in such a manner that he is seen by others as leading a balanced and harmonious life," she explains (Cordova 1992, 105). Humans might not use their extraordinary capacities to control their behavior properly, but their purpose—to act correctly—remains, and these humans have fallen short of their true potential. Similarly, nonhumans can also fall short of their purposes—either through their own actions, for ones that can control their behavior, or due to external factors. In Native American thinking, rivers are usually described as natural beings with spirit and therefore corresponding purposes, powers, and potentials to be actualized (Napoleon 2009, 126).

Humans have a considerable ability to change the way we behave and live. Because of this, it is very difficult to ascertain the purposes of humans (Burkhart 2019, 284). But since other beings cannot control their behavior in the same way, understanding their purposes is less complicated. In Deloria's explanation, beings have a relatively consistent "set of relationships with other entities." Recounting his nation's traditions, he writes that people became concerned "when a plant or animal was found in a place where it should not be" because it indicated that a being was diverging from its natural way of being and that something may be wrong (Deloria 1999c, 55). His point is that the relations between beings follow a normative pattern, and the pattern should be comprehensible to the attentive observer.

Deloria's argument affirms the general idea I have been outlining from this survey of Native American thinking: that the beings that make the world understandable are natural beings with species-specific spirits and purposes. As humans, we can go a long way toward understanding the world by careful consideration of the beings in our embedded environment, and once we have reasonable certainty about these purposes, we have some moral knowledge in addition to scientific knowledge.

To be clear, this does not mean that for Native American thinkers natural things simply are good and artificial things are bad, especially when it comes to human behavior. It is clearly a part of human nature to create artificial things and alter the environment, just as it is part of a beaver's nature to build dams that alter creeks. Determining good and bad actions, especially for beings as complex as humans, requires deeper ethical consideration. Suffice it to say here that the ethical picture is far more complicated than simply that the natural is good and the artificial is bad (Burkhart 2019, 283–84), but it is certainly true that the natural is in some way related to the good, as are the natural purposes of all beings. The flourishing of beings appears to have something to do with them exercising their specific powers and purposes. Thinking back again to the White Earth Band's description of Manoomin, which

emphasized the importance of Manoomin flourishing, we can see this as Manoomin having the conditions necessary (such as the water access that initiated the band's legal action) to exercise its powers and achieve its purpose.

In the previous two sections, I have laid out how North American Indigenous thinkers understand the natural world. I have argued that in place of abstract physical laws of elementary particles in laboratories, they aim to understand nature by careful, contextualized observation. In this observation, they focus especially on the behaviors of whole beings, which are irreducible to their parts, and which have powers and capacities specific to their kind. Indigenous thinkers appear to be committed to the idea that there is an immaterial principle of unity—essences or forms—to certain natural beings that makes them agents and gives them characteristics distinct to the kind of being that they are.

5. CONCLUSION

I began by considering the White Earth Band's description of Manoomin's legal and political significance, which raised the question of how wild rice using water could be ethically or politically significant. My premise was that a philosophic analysis of Indigenous political thinking on nature could help illuminate how Indigenous thinkers understand nature, especially given the history of non-Indigenous peoples either disregarding or failing to understand Indigenous perspectives. Some Indigenous accounts of natural philosophy, such as Wub-e-ke-niew's reflections, can be difficult to parse, and ones focused on political change are less concerned with philosophic details. In this article I offered a deep analysis of Native American thinkers to answer the question the Manoomin case raises—or, to pose Brian Burkhart's conclusion as a query, how a Native understanding of nature "founds Native morality" and politics (Burkhart 2019, 293).

I argued that this founding is possible because Indigenous thinkers are moral naturalists who reject the is/ought divide of modern Western philosophy, because they maintain that there are whole beings in the world imbued with inherent identifiable purposes, and because these purposes have moral significance. When we see beings with inherent (not merely instrumental to human life) moral significance around us, it follows that we should consider expanding the boundaries of political life to include them. As I made clear from the beginning, I am not suggesting that this is the only way that Indigenous thinkers see the connection between nonhuman nature and morality. But it is one possible interpretation that shows that Indigenous thinking is not simply the retention of pre-philosophical understandings of the world.

My study is focused on the broad structure of Indigenous thinking on nature. If this thinking is to receive more general support—or, in Daniel Wildcat's words, help "save the planet"—future work needs to center on details that might convince those "deeply skeptical about the empirical accuracy of [Indigenous] views about the natural world" (Hendrix 2008, 178). Modern philosophy and science and those who champion the modern Western project see themselves as enormously successful in both understanding the world and helping humans live longer, healthier, and freer lives, even as they may acknowledge past injustices such as colonialism, slavery, and environmental degradation (Hösle 2004; Pinker 2012, 2018). Countering this tradition, as Indigenous thinkers seek to do, is no small task. And like other ideas, in this process Indigenous thinking should be respectfully questioned, evaluated, and considered critically.

We should ask what criteria exist to determine whether nonhuman things are beings. Is it right to consider rivers or ecosystems beings? Or should this be restricted to discrete entities? Is it possible to have composite beings? Or must they be unitary? Why would a rock smaller than a fist be inanimate and one larger be animate? What does it mean to consider other beings and their flourishing in our ethical and political lives? Indigenous thinkers do not suggest that it means treating them as if they were humans, as they insist that the hunting, fishing, and harvesting of other moral beings is permissible in the right circumstances, but such treatment of human beings is never permissible. Yet Indigenous thinkers often resist the idea of a hierarchy of beings (Wub-e-keniew 1995; Cordova 2004, 177; Burkhart 2019, 168). Given that we must kill and eat other beings to live, and that no one is suggesting that healthy human lives ought to be sacrificed for other beings, can we truly include nonhuman natural beings within political communities without a hierarchical ordering? If Manoomin should be free to exist from various human interventions such as water deprivation, how can we justify harvesting its seeds to eat?

Putting Indigenous thinking in dialogue with other philosophical traditions will help us ask and answer these questions. Like other philosophies, Indigenous thought offers understandings about how the world is. These arguments and their political significance are embedded in cultural traditions, but non-Indigenous peoples can still access the arguments to some degree. As Anishnaabe law professor Aaron Mills writes of his nation's constitutionalism, one he describes as "rooted" in the natural world, "Though your stories may be different and you and I may not read the Earth in just the same way, this is a constitutional framework open to all" (2017, 245; see also Paradies 2020, 442). I noted earlier that even though Indigenous thinking differs considerably from the dominant modern Humean-Kantian tradition, there are other competing substantive visions in modern Western philosophy with which it may

share more. These competing contemporary accounts do not reduce nature to mechanism or evacuate morality from it. Certain Indigenous thinkers have begun dialogues in this realm, as Raymond Pierotti (2015) has done with the Aristotelian tradition.

There are additional figures working in contemporary political philosophy who reject materialism and a mechanistic account of nature in terms of both its accuracy and its effects on human life (MacIntyre 1999; Nagel 2012). Developments in cosmology have left many wondering whether the theories physicists have endorsed for decades are also fundamentally unsound (Frank and Gleiser 2023). Now is a time for deep dialogue among varied cultural traditions about the foundations of the universe and nature on earth, as well as the meaning of these things for human life. By engaging with non-Indigenous thinkers and traditions, Native American thinkers may find allies in their effort to build a philosophic framework for a different political future. Likewise, non-Indigenous academic philosophers who devote many words to modernity's misfires but struggle to see how alternatives can be instantiated politically might find in Indigenous work a tighter link between thinking and action (Simpson 2011, 44).

For dialogue among Indigenous and non-Indigenous philosophic traditions to occur, we must see Indigenous thought as worthy of study not merely because it comes from a group of people historically oppressed by North American states. Instead, we must see it as a serious intellectual tradition that attempts to answer the fundamental problems of human existence (Cordova 2007, 61). If Native American arguments and positions are treated as the affirmed truths of oppressed peoples, or of interest solely because of the way colonial states have treated them, their substantive claims will never really be taken seriously. Indigenous scholars will have the burden of their ideas being treated as cultural artifacts in a museum and not—as they almost invariably self-describe—as dynamic understandings of individuals and communities trying to make sense of a mysterious world (Martínez 2009). If that mystery sometimes seems overwhelming, we might hope that it will appear less so when we honestly encounter the other, an encounter at the very crux of all philosophic and political life.

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