

PROCESS METAPHYSICS IN THE FAR WEST: AMERICAN INDIAN
ONTOLOGIES

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am not American Indian, I do not have any American Indian blood. I am a Hungarian-German, whose grandparents moved to North America in the early 1900s. I am very much influenced by the Western culture I grew up in, even though I often find myself at odds with its practices, philosophies, and politics. One might wonder why I have devoted a year and a half to research on American Indian philosophy. After all, there are some American Indian scholars in academia who don't believe it is appropriate for non-Natives to impart the knowledge of the American Indian, and I respectfully acknowledge that here. I must make my apologies to those I may offend for doing the very thing they oppose. It is my belief, however, that an honest, cautious, and respectful approach to helping legitimize a worldview I find so fascinating, and have so many sympathies with, is at least worthy of some merit. In *Science, Colonialism, and Indigenous Peoples*, Choctaw scholar Laurie Whitt agrees with Wendy Rose that non-Natives *can* make valid observations on Native cultures. The problem they see with non-Native scholars arises from inappropriate methods and dubious intents.

I do not pretend to have a mature understanding of the appropriate comportment a scholar, let alone a non-Native, should have in this particular kind of endeavor, but I do know that American Indians hold their knowledge as very special and it should be handled and treated in special ways—as my advisor tells me, it is a *gift* and should be treated with *respect*. My advisor Thomas Norton-Smith has been very kind in treating this like traditional projects in Western philosophy, even when it perhaps conflicts with the correct and respectful actions he is aware of while I am not, and I thank him for that here.

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I'd also like to thank faculty members Kwang-Sae Lee, Gina Zavota, Frank Ryan, Jung-Yeup Kim of the Kent State philosophy department for their interaction in my philosophical life and how they have impacted it. I also want to thank my colleagues in the philosophy graduate student department at Kent State for their moral support, their musings, and the collective “we're in this together” spirit.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a work in American Indian philosophy. The term itself seems to suggest that there is a monolithic set of beliefs that *all* Indians maintain, and this, of course, is not the case. The fact is that there were, at one time, “hundreds of Native tribes and nations, each with its own culture, language, history, origin story, and ceremonial cycle—even with its own 'intellectualism', or ways of thinking about the world...”¹ Despite the variety of beliefs and worldviews, there are common “themes” that emerge from careful and thoughtful analysis across many Native tribes. So, while the correct title would read “American Indian philosophies”, for the purpose of understanding these common themes, the title “American Indian philosophy” works, and has some credence to it as there are indeed some important commonalities amongst tribes and nations.

It is generally accepted that a predominant theme of Native worldviews is the concept of relationality, or the interrelatedness of all things. Animals (both human and non-human), places, communities, ideas, even rocks, plants, mountains, etc., are interrelated. These relationships constitute the vital connection between beings, and thus oblige all things to acknowledge and respect those relations, and of course each other. The view that all things are related should not be taken lightly: even at the most

¹Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place: One interpretation of American Indian Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 3. Even now, there are 565 federally recognized tribes.

fundamental, metaphysical level beings are seen as interrelated. As I will argue in this work, this pervasive theme is the crux of many corollary themes in Native philosophy.

Another theme in American Indian philosophy, which is less pervasive and more specific to Native “metaphysics” and “science” (we will see later that there really is no sharp distinction between these), is what Gregory Cajete calls the universe's ordering principle: creativity, or the fluid, processual nature of all things. In Native worldviews, beings, whether human persons, flowers, or electrons, are thought to be *active* entities which are defined by their processual and fluid nature, not their temporally-enduring, material nature as the mainstream Western ontologist might argue. Furthermore, as we noted above, in the Native worldview everything is interrelated. So on the Native view, entities are active, creative processes which are vitally interrelated. The view Cajete propounds, when coupled with the concept of relationality, has interesting implications for an American Indian ontology.

As I will argue in this work, the Native worldview, here read “Native ontology”, is committed to some of the fundamental tenets of process ontology. What distinguishes process ontology from substance ontology in the West is not so much the views of any one process thinker, e.g., Alfred North Whitehead, William James, Henri Bergson, John Dewey to name a few, but the adherence to the central premise of process metaphysics in general: “that physical existence is at bottom processual; that processes rather than things best represent the phenomena that we encounter in the natural world about us.”² Process

²Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (New York, NY: SUNY

metaphysics differs from the mainstream view of Western metaphysics in claiming that the natural or material world and its furniture, i.e., objects or entities, are most accurately portrayed as fully interrelated processes, rather than discrete objects that are characterized by their material persistence through time. This is not to say that process thinking involves a denial of substance thinking *flat-out*, or vice-versa. I only intend to present substance and process views as different, *but not mutually exclusive*, ways of interpreting the world.³

In the first chapter I work to clarify what process ontology is by juxtaposing it with what it is most readily opposed to, substance ontology. Clarifying and defining what process ontology is allows us to see what aspects of Native ontology resonate with process ontology. Chapter II focuses on Native ontology from the perspective of language, ecology, story, logic, and epistemology. We will see the themes of relationality and process inherent in all of these areas.

A few words on the term “Native”. I use this term to refer to something *of* American Indians, for example, Native philosophies and Native worldviews are understood as American Indian philosophies and American Indian worldviews. Furthermore, of course, the term also denotes the inhabitants of the continent before Western European colonization. I avoid using the term “Native American” because it seems to suggest that American Indians are Americans who happen to be of Native

Press, 1996), 2.

³We will look at a model in the introduction to chapter II which offers a way of understanding how the acceptance of one of two “seemingly” opposite views does not necessarily involve a denial of the other.

descent, which is obviously not the case. They are Natives of the continent, they are citizens of sovereign nations, i.e. Cherokee, Shawnee, Lakota, Navajo, etc., but they are not inherently, or for many by choice, merely citizens of an “American nation”.

Again, the purpose of this work is to demonstrate that Native worldviews commit to some of the central tenets of process ontology. While there is a lot of comparative literature that uses and abuses the expression “process ontology” as a sort of novelty term for anything that is not “Western”, I have developed my own understanding of process ontology based on Nicholas Rescher's interpretation. For example, many commentators on East Asian philosophy contrast the West with the East by saying the West is committed to substance ontology while the East is committed to process ontology (without even a hint as to what is meant by the terms).

It also should be noted that, while comparative philosophy must often rely on broad generalizations to provide a clear enough contrast between two cultures, it should always be understood with caution. When process thinkers say American Indian philosophy or East Asian philosophy is process oriented and Western philosophy is substance oriented, it must be remembered that this is a broad generalization, and does *not* mean that there is *no* process thinking in the West, and *no* substance thinking elsewhere. What it means is that there is a *predominant tendency* in the respective culture or tradition. Furthermore, as this is a work in philosophy, the generalizations are also *philosophical* generalizations. We will encounter talk of objects being static, enduring

substances in substance (Western) ontology, but this does not mean that there is no conception of objects as dynamic in substance-oriented traditions.

Finally, I have three goals for this work: 1) to show the level of uniqueness, care, and sophistication in Native thought, that it is as legitimate as other worldviews which enjoy respect in the Western academy; 2) to explicate process ontology and clarify its meaning; and 3) to argue that Native philosophy commits to the central tenets of process ontology. This, I believe, will also stimulate conversation, and open up the possibility for much comparative analysis for American Indian, comparative, and process scholars alike.

CHAPTER I

Process Ontology

The goal of this chapter is to introduce the fundamental tenets of process ontology which, as I will argue in the next chapter, finds much sympathy in American Indian worldviews. However, for our present purposes we will be working within the Western tradition to see what process ontology is by way of what it most readily opposes: substance ontology. We begin by examining what both ontologies see as the fundamental nature of objects in the material world. My claim is that substance ontology finds expression in attributing states of being to objects, while process ontology finds expression in claiming that objects are processes of becoming. A consequence of the opposing views is a particular preference for applying certain ontological categories to objects. After clarifying the substance-process dichotomy, we briefly look at some of the ways substance categories are present in Western philosophy. This will serve as a transition into the next chapter, which explores the presence of process categories in American Indian worldviews.

What is “Ontology”?

The word and concept “ontology” are used and understood in various ways, often making them ambiguous if not carefully defined. Let me first define the *two* senses in which I am using the term. In a robust sense, I am thinking of ontology in terms of predication, i.e., ascribing an action or process, or a state or quality to an object. In comparing substance and process approaches to objects—when we ask the question “what is the fundamental nature of objects?”—we want to know whether objects are, at bottom, either substances *as* particular states of being or substances that are *in* states of being (substance), or either objects *as* processes of becoming or substances *in* processes of becoming (process). Assuming that we will clarify the versions of substance and process ontology (especially objects *as* processes of becoming) given above, it is clear that we want to make a fundamental predication about objects. Put differently, we have an object (a tree, a dog, etc.) as the subject. The kind of predicate we want to ascribe to the subject is one that expresses its ontological being or nature. Is the tree a temporally enduring substance in states of being (brown, tall, narrow), or is the tree an event of becoming (a process growing)?⁴

⁴Note that this does not claim these are the only ways objects can fundamentally “be” in the world, only that this work is concerned with the way mainstream substance and process ontologies approach the way objects “be” in the world. There are other substance-ontologies that are not represented here mainly because they are somewhere between strong and weak versions, or beyond the distinction altogether. Also, we are not concerned with or skeptical about *the* existence of objects. We are concerned here with the way their existence as objects is characterized and understood in both process and substance orientations. Finally, this does not mean to imply that the two ontologies are *mutually exclusive*. However, for our purposes we must be precise about the distinction, there may be some of each in the other—a point I, and many process-oriented views would agree with.

An interesting aspect of predication conceived of in this way is that it is somewhat unconventional or non-standard in Western philosophy because predication is typically understood as ascribing states or properties to objects. We, however, understand predication as ascribing *actions*, *processes*, or, of course, states or properties to objects. We must include these categories if we are to accommodate process ontologies in our analysis. To my mind, the absence of process categories in mainstream Western predication only further shows the dominance of substance thinking in the tradition. As we proceed in this work, I argue that a hallmark of Western philosophy is the presence and application of substance categories in various areas of Western thinking and culture. However, this is not even a new or original claim. Many comparative and cultural philosophers are finding this consistent trend in Western philosophy. For example, in his comparative work *East and West*, Kwang-Sae Lee asserts, in commenting on David Hall's *The Uncertain Phoenix*, that “the mainstream of traditional Western philosophy has been dominated by substance ontology...”⁵ Of course, on the other hand, I will argue that process categories are the dominant trend in American Indian thought.

In a more expansive sense of “ontology”, I am thinking of ontology as a worldview, i.e, how we categorize or understand objects in experience and what that implies about a culture's mainstream beliefs about the nature or being of objects. In what way do we think and talk about objects as a culture? When we see a redbone coonhound, do we categorize the dog as a temporally-enduring, material substance that is *red*, or do we categorize the dog as an event of processes that *reds*? In this case, the former uses

⁵Lee, Kwang-Sae. *East and West: Fusion of Horizons* (Paramus, NJ: Homa & Sekey Books, 2006), 80.

substance categories, and the latter uses process categories to express the coonhound's ontological being or nature. It is reasonable to say that this sense of worldview is ontological in that it expresses a culture's deep-seated beliefs about how objects are or “be” in the world (as processes or as static states), or at least how a culture's thinking and language have developed to understand and convey those beliefs. In either sense, we tend to see a coherent pattern of general preference for certain ontological categories, and this gives shape to the broad ontological worldview behind it.⁶

It is this latter sense of ontology that will become the point of focus as our investigation turns to the presence of substance tendencies in the mainstream West, and in the next chapter where, as I argue, we will see process tendencies in traditional Native worldviews.

We will now focus on the former sense of ontology, as predication, so as to develop the fundamental distinction between substance and process ontology. As we saw

⁶One must be careful here not to push the idea of ontology as worldviews further than its practical aim of grasping a general, but not exact, sense of a culture's ontological sentiments towards objects. If we press beyond the practical intentions of this idea, all kinds of assumptions and deep philosophical problems arise; incommensurability and “getting outside” linguistic descriptions among them. If this cautionary in cross-cultural comparative philosophy has not been emphasized enough, I am not claiming or assuming we can *fully* understand other culture's philosophies or thoughts, since we often must situate them in terms of our own philosophical assumptions and concepts. Furthermore, that we can even verify that our understanding is the same or even close to the one we seek. As regards philosophical positions which see language as the dictator of experience, I am not assuming or claiming that language expresses the way we actually experience the world, nor am I assuming or claiming that language expresses the *entire* content of *everyone's* experience. I am only assuming that deep-seated, mainstream, predominant beliefs about the nature of the world manifest themselves in certain cultural forms of expression like language, science, philosophy. Furthermore, I do assume and claim that this is a reasonable and useful assumption to make. If it were not, then much of our Western understandings of non-Western culture, philosophy, and religion would have to be called into question.

above, ontology as *predication* means that we are ascribing a fundamental way of being (a state, action, or process) to objects.

Substance Ontology

The characteristic feature of substance ontology is its focus on states of being, either predicating them of objects, or reducing objects to them. We need to see what the most essential difference between these two versions is (the weak version being the former, the strong version being the latter). We notice that weak versions characterize objects as substances that are *in* states of being, whereas strong versions simply say objects *are* states of being. The question now is what does “objects are substances themselves *in* states of being” (weak) mean, and what does “objects are only collections of states of being” (strong) mean?

The most apparent difference is that strong versions reduce the object and the conception of the object to the states of being ascribed to it. This is unlike weak versions which ascribe states of being to an enduring substance, whatever that may be, and this constitutes the object.⁷ A strong version would say our redbone coonhound is a collection of states of being and nothing more; he *is* red, *is* a mammal, *is* temporally-enduring, *is* made up of atoms, etc., until we have specified every state of being applicable to him.

⁷For our purposes, specificity concerning this temporally-enduring substance that has states of being attributed to it is not of much importance. The only concern we have is that it is a substance that is enduring and it serve as something of a substratum for the object and the states of being attributed to it. Moreover, that it is a permanent, fixed substance assures its place in the substance camp.

The dog is a substance to be sure, but only a substance in virtue of the states of being attributed to him.

If we think of Plato as a champion of strong substance ontology we might get a helpful illustration. For Plato, objects are what they are by virtue of the forms in which they participate. The redbone coonhound as an object is ultimately reduced to the forms (states of being) in which he participates—the dog participates in the forms of redness, dogness, languidness, to name a few. On Plato's view, then, we can fully articulate the object—and the conception of the dog as an object—by acknowledging all the forms in which he participates. So for Plato, objects are only states of being and nothing more.

Weak versions, as we have seen, do not reduce the object and the conception of the object to states of being, rather they claim that an object is *in* particular states of being at any particular time. The difference is that there is no specificity about the substance itself which is in particular states of being. So for a weak substance ontologist, our redbone coonhound, as an object, is a substance that is in particular states of being at particular times, e.g., as a puppy he was light orange and now as a full-grown dog he is dark red. In this version the object (redbone coonhound) is seen as a temporally-enduring substance that is in the state of being red, full grown, etc.

Democritus illustrates weak substance ontology in this way. Democritus maintains that while the fundamental substance of an object (atoms) does not change, the bodies

they comprise do.⁸ There are several points here. First, and most importantly, the fundamental substratum of objects is permanent on Democritus' view, i.e., temporally enduring, they remain the substratum of the object throughout its existence. Secondly, some importance is given to process and change, i.e., the object's states of being change. Our redbone goes from being light orange to dark red (states of being) but his material substratum stays the same.

There are significant ontological implications for the separate versions, such as strong substance version's denial of the reality of change or process (Parmenides and Plato, for instance), i.e., no such thing as process or change *really* exists. Conversely, the weak substance version affirms change and process and its role in the reality of objects (Democritus and Aristotle), i.e., change and process constantly play a role in the constitution of objects. It is not, however, the denial or affirmation of change and process that is significant for our purposes. What is important as we move on to explore categories in substance ontology is that in both versions *objects are thought to be best characterized or understood by referencing their states of being and enduring substance.*

Substance categories

Recall that the sense of ontology we wish to employ here concerns itself with how substance ontologies categorize objects being. Substance ontologies claim, in one way or another, that objects and the states of being they are associated with are discrete, and

⁸Gregory, Andrew. *Ancient Greek Cosmogony* (London, England: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 2007), 117.

static. They find that the best way to account for, or describe, the phenomena we experience as “objects” in everyday experience (dogs, trees, chairs) is to claim that they are temporally enduring material substances in states of being, e.g., the coonhound is red. The dog, a temporally enduring material substance and an enduring concept, is in the state of being red. Red is not any other color, it is discrete in that sense; the idea and state of being red is distinct or detached from other colors like yellow or purple. Red, as a state of being and concept, is static because red is understood as a fixed adjectival state; whether something stays red or changes to violet, red as an adjectival state does not itself change. Thus, red is a static category.

It is clear that whether we are talking about the states of being or the objects themselves, substance ontologies describe them largely in terms of static, discrete categories. To be sure, in either instance it does not compromise the general tendency of substance ontologies to categorize, understand, and talk about objects as discrete, and static. This conception of objects as discrete, static entities is consistent with the worldview these objects furnish—the mainstream Western worldview. This worldview introduced by the ancient Greeks and solidified by the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, is a conception of the world as “material and inanimate, mechanical and rational, amenable to quantitative description and governed by fixed physical laws. It is orderly, fixed, and finished.”⁹ On this view, the world and its objects are largely static, discrete, and predictable, i.e., well-established, past regularities will extend into the

⁹Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 47.

future. The world is understood and characterized not by processes and change but by that which is regular and enduring.

Plato is an early advocate of this worldview. Plato insisted that “reason demands stability: whatever it grasps must be constant, unchanging, timelessly true.”¹⁰ It is not surprising that Western philosophy has been *predominately*, but not entirely, substance-oriented in its philosophical and scientific thinking since then. In the modern scientific era, *a là* the scientific revolution, Western science has dominated, if not *dictated*, the Western worldview. Reason grasps the unchanging realm of thought and science grasps the unchanging realm of the material world. What this line of thinking leads to is the belief that reality is something beyond our senses, graspable only through reason, mathematical analysis, and theory. To my mind, this distinction between appearance and reality has been one of the most consistent threads of Western thinking. What this line of thinking also leads us to is a cultural perspective, or ontology as worldview, that sees the material world and its objects as inert, governed by fixed laws.

It should be clear how substance ontology's conception of objects gels with the larger worldview which engenders it. Recall the second sense of ontology (as worldview) which was discussed earlier. The way we categorize, understand, and talk about objects as a culture reflects, at least in part, ontological beliefs about them. In the case of mainstream Western culture, objects are seen as discrete, and static entities. In terms of the larger picture that will have been painted by the end of this chapter, it doesn't make

¹⁰Rescher, Nicholas. *Process Metaphysics*, 10.

much difference whether one adopts a strong or weak substance ontology because, as we have seen, any substance ontology will give primacy to the states of being ascribed to the object. This is because the ontological backdrop of this worldview associates reality with what is stable, fixed, and determinate. Thinkers in this context tend to eschew ascribing dynamic, or fluctuating properties to reality (among reality are objects of course) because these properties or qualities are *always in process*. Since process does not compliment the clinging need Western thinking (and science) has for stable fixity and a finished world, any conception of process as being fundamental to objects is either ignored or outright denied by the mainstream. As we will see, process thinking reverses the priority; it is *process* that is most fundamental to objects, *not* the stable substance or states of being associated with it.

Process Ontology

Just as substance ontology is divided into two versions (strong and weak), so too is process ontology. Strong versions claim that objects *are* fundamentally processes of becoming. Weak versions claim that objects are *in* processes of becoming. The difference might be easier to grasp since we have met a similar distinction with substance ontology. The most apparent difference between strong and weak process ontology is that strong versions reduce objects to processes of becoming where weak versions do not. Weak versions claim that there are objects (whatever they may be, much like weak substance ontology) that are *in* processes of becoming. The difference here is that weak versions

might admit some kind of object that acts as the substratum of processes but does not undergo change itself.

At this point, one might wonder why distinguish weak substance ontology and weak process ontology at all? As previously mentioned, and as we will again see, the most important distinction is to what an ontology gives primacy (in terms of predication and worldviews as we have discussed): a weak substance ontology gives primacy to the static nature of the states of being ascribed to an object where weak process ontology gives primacy to the processes ascribed to an object. Here, “giving primacy” means what an ontology sees as fundamental to an object's nature. If one finds states of being as most important to an object's nature or essence (like Plato) then a substance approach would be compelling. If one finds the processes which an object undergoes as most fundamental then a processual approach would be compelling.

Coming back to the objective of this section, i.e., distinguishing strong and weak process ontologies, we see that the strong version reduces objects and the conception of objects to processes of becoming full-bore. Again, strong versions maintain a reductionism which reduces objects to processes. For strong versions, it is not the case that there is an object (whatever it may be, just as it was with weak substance ontology) that is *in* processes of becoming like weak versions. On the strong version, even what weak process ontology (or any substance ontology) would think an object, is thought of as a process itself; there are no static, enduring “substances” or “objects” that are *in* states of being or processes of becoming. The object itself, in whatever capacity, just *is* a

process. Even the “stuffs” or materials that make up the object are processes. For example, any process view regards our redbone as being, at least, a process in some capacity. On the strong version, even the individual atoms making up the dog are viewed as processes—hence a useful expression we will encounter later: “microprocesses within a macroprocess”.

Let's look at some Western proponents of process ontology to get a clearer picture of the views. As the “founding father” of *Western* process philosophy, Heraclitus exemplifies strong process ontology. Rescher notes that “as Heraclitus saw it, we must avoid at all costs the fallacy of substantializing nature into perduring things (substances) [or static states of being I might add] because they are not stable things but fundamental forces and the varied and fluctuating activities which they produce that make up this world of ours. [sic]”¹¹ He also points out that for Heraclitus “reality is at bottom not a constellation of *things* [objects, in the sense we have come to understand them] at all but one of *processes*.”¹² It is clear that for Heraclitus, the world and its objects are fundamentally processual. It is not even the case that objects (or substances) are *in* processes of becoming (weak process ontology), they *are* processes of becoming, and everything that constitutes them *are* processes too. For Heraclitus, the world and *all* of its furniture are processes. He does not distinguish between the object and the process but rather makes the robust claim that all objects (and that includes all that make up the objects) are processes. This is a strong process ontology.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

What's more, on the strong version of process ontology, even the term "object" itself is inappropriate since "object" denotes a fixed enduring entity through time. I would argue that the term "event" ought to replace the term "object" because it suggests a mere frame in time where a process of becoming is currently. The event could be a tree when it is but a sapling, and 100 years later the event could be the enormous tree that has become (and is still becoming) of the sapling. I will not introduce the term "event" into the language of this work to avoid confusion, but this suggestion ought to be reflected upon insofar as it reveals how serious a strong process ontology takes the notion that "everything is process".

Empedocles is an early advocate of weak process ontology. He maintains that there are four basic elements that we can think of as his enduring, unchanging substances or objects (earth, air, fire, and water). According to Empedocles, it is the mixing and arranging of these various elements that account for the objects we experience in the world. Furthermore, it is the various ratios at which these elements combine and contribute to objects that account for the diversity that exists in the world. However, these elements by themselves are motionless. They require, thinks Empedocles, two fundamental forces, or processes (personified as Love and Strife), which are by nature opposed to each other. These two fundamental processes are responsible for the "movement" of the elements, and this in turn initiates and enforces the mixing and combining of substances to make objects.

It is clear that not only does Empedocles see elements as unchanging objects or substances, but also that Love and Strife (fundamental processes) are alone responsible for object's being and existence in the world. We can see from this that Empedocles maintains a weak process ontology because without the fundamental processes, objects would not be. Thus, Empedocles recognizes the fundamental importance of process, while also maintaining that there are enduring objects or substances (elements). Put differently, objects (elements) are *in* processes of becoming (the effects of Love and Strife combining and mixing elements).¹³

To recapitulate, weak process ontology, like weak substance ontology, is less bold in its ontological claims and views about objects. As we have said, weak process ontology maintains that objects are *in* processes of becoming, meaning that there are discernible objects (whatever they may be, a collection of atoms or elements for example) that are temporally enduring. However, they are fundamentally characterized by the processes which engender them. These processes are more important or are viewed as more fundamental to the object's nature than any enduring character or quality associated with the object itself. So the processes that are or are associated with the object are more fundamental to its nature even if it does appear to have enduring features—features the substance ontologists would view as most fundamental. For the weak process ontologist “[p]rocess has *priority* over substance. Things [objects] are always subordinate to

¹³ My understanding of Empedocles owes much to Andrew Gregory's interpretation in *Ancient Greek Cosmology* as cited in note v. Also, see “The View of the Atomists” chapter in *The Origins of Materialism* by George Novak.

processes because processes inwardly engender, determine, and characterize the things there are.”¹⁴

Now, strong process ontology by contrast does not even maintain that the enduring substances that weak versions cling to are such; they too are processes of becoming. Put simply, all *things* are processes; the appearance of stability is an illusion underneath which processes are occurring. Just as Parmenides maintains that process and change are an illusion, strong process ontology, typified by Heraclitus, maintains the ultimate irreality of static, unchanging objects and substances.

Process Categories

Following the same format as our earlier discussion of substance ontology and its categories, we will now consider process categories and the worldviews they embrace.¹⁵

In one way or the other, process ontologies view objects as dynamic, active, and interrelated processes. They find that the most accurate way to account for, or describe, objects is to reference them by way of the processes they *are* or the processes that engender the objects. It might be obvious why process ontologists see objects as such by the very open-ended nature of process tendencies and thinking. If something is a process

¹⁴Rescher, Nicholas. *Process Metaphysics*, 2.

¹⁵ I have distinguished the two (predication and ontology as worldviews) because when we talk about categories and ontology as worldview they tend to be much more expansive than predication alone. Particularly because, as we've already seen, categories present in ones ontology often pervade the entire worldview. We saw such an example with Western substance ontology's manifestations, or influence, in Western science and philosophy.

it is *ipso facto* dynamic, because process necessarily entails fluctuation (change and creativity), and fluidity (non-permanence and non-fixity). Moreover, process *means* activity in one sense or the other. Finally, processes are, can be, or will be interrelated, because process does not entail rigidity and fixity of relationships, or fixity of the future. One may already begin to see why relationality (interrelatedness) is so crucial to process ontology since these categories overlap in significant ways.

Before we continue, it is useful to remember that ontology as worldview means how a culture's ontology “sees” or categorizes something, in our case objects. It is not a matter of which culture's ontology correctly identifies or more closely corresponds to some reality, whatever that may be. All it means is that there are different categories that a worldview or ontology chooses to emphasize. This work is merely *describing* how ontologies might view things the way they do, and why certain categories fit into certain ontological frameworks as they do. Thus, as mentioned previously, this work has no interest in judging whether a category is or even ought to be considered fundamental, because our claim holds that different cultures *do* give priority and primacy to different categories, and *do* think them as fundamental.

Let's return to our faithful example of the redbone coonhound to see how the three above categories fit into process ontology. First, the dog, as an object, is *dynamic* in that he is a growing organism which responds to changes in his environment and himself—changing to suit current needs and always changing to suit future needs. Also, since the future is not fixed and the world is not finished in the process worldview, objects *must be*

dynamic, better yet flexible, in order to harmonize future imbalances. His being, as an object, is fundamentally dynamic because of this constant cycle of disruption and reconciliation. This is but one immediately realizable way that objects are dynamic.¹⁶ As we will see, this seemingly banal sense of the dynamic gains a richer content and credence as we see processual thinking fully contextualized.

The second category to explore is the idea that objects are *active*. This category may prove to be, in part, an extension of relationality (interrelatedness), but is none the less an important category to underscore because it opposes the idea that objects are inert and static. We know that processes, by their very nature, are dynamic. Dynamism also entails activity; for objects to be active rather than inert suggests that an object is continuously “participating”, as it were, in its processes or becoming. For example, on the process view the redbone coonhound, as an object, is active because he *reds* or is *redding*. This is different from the substance view which sees the dog as *red*. On the substance view, the dog is in the static state of being red. On the process view, the dog is in the process of redding. We can see that, in a sense, there is activity going on if for no other reason than because “reds” or “redding”—like “moves” and “moving”—would be

¹⁶ One might say that the dog example is not very illustrative because organism of all kinds grow and adapt, what about rocks? How are rocks fundamentally processes? They are processes in the same way a chair, or a pencil are. They were once something else and are now something different, and will become something else in the future. A rock was a grain of sand and it has transformed into a tightly bundled mass of many grains of sand, and in the future it may turn to liquid magma. This is why process thinking is so expansive, open-ended, and infinite, unlike its substance counter-part which finds comfort in viewing the world as it is at a current moment and wishing to freeze it to create a worldview that is fixed and finished as we've already explored. We will soon see why interrelatedness is so important to process thinking, and consequently to Native thinking. Furthermore, remember that we are not concerned whether substance or process ontologies correctly identify the *true* nature of objects, we are only showing what characteristics each ontology sees as fundamental to objects nature.

an intransitive verb, which accompanies the intuition of activity in some capacity. On the other hand “red” is an adjectival state, and as we saw in the substance section this accompanies the intuition of a static state of being.¹⁷

Of all the process categories in general (those presented here are but a few), I think relationality is one of the most crucial to process thinking. We know that substance ontologies view objects (and subsequently the states of being associated with them), as fundamentally discrete. As substance thinking sees it, they are detached or distinct from other objects in a significant ontological sense, that is, for purposes of categorizing and understanding objects. Process ontology, by contrast, sees relationality as fundamental to objects. Not only are all objects related to each other in important ways, but they are all related to the macroprocess that encompass them. For example, Earth is the macroprocess that encompasses all of its microprocesses (objects), or the atoms that make up the redbone coonhound (the macroprocess) are the microprocesses.

Relationality is conceptualized in many ways, some banal, some seemingly more ontologically significant. For example, one might see the functional unity of cells whose collective activity makes an organ as analogous to the nature of relationality in process

¹⁷Like much of process thinking, as David Hall notes in the “Uncertain Phoenix”, the difference here is more intuitive than discursive. To transparently unpack the distinction is a work of its own. It's worth remembering that this work is descriptive and *not* prescriptive. I am not arguing for process ontology over substance ontology, nor am I providing evidence that suggests one camp is closer to the reality of the situation over the other. The fact remains that there is content to each ontology's worldview. The important distinction in focus here is what kinds of categories each camp chooses to emphasize and which categories they choose to de-emphasize. Furthermore, since process thinking is quite foreign to Western thought *and* language, as an English speaker my capacity is limited as to my ability to express process sentiments. As we will see in the next chapter, Native languages express process views quite easily. For example, a Shawnee speaker would say the redbone coonhound reds, just as our examples have shown above.

thinking. The cells are interrelated by way of the unity they create, i.e. the organ. The organ is an instantiation of relationality of processes, i.e. individual cells combining and unifying, because without it there would be no organ. In this sense, the interrelated nature of things is the cause of unified objects—without the relationality, there would simply be unstructured chaos.

One may notice that relationality is not just a simple parts to whole relation, but it also stresses the importance of the functional unity of the parts (microprocesses) which characterize and determines the object as a whole (macroprocess).

“[W]hen smaller processes join to form larger ones, the relation is not simply one of part to whole but of productive contributory to aggregate result. The notes are not just constituent parts of the song, they are the active elements of its production.”¹⁸

Not only is the object *qua* object a result of relationality, but so too are its qualities or characters which distinguish it. The *ways* in which processes relate in particular objects gives those objects their uniqueness.

A more ontologically “significant” conception of relationality is one which claims that even two seemingly diametric opposites constitute and are constituted by the other. For example, dark and light seem opposed to one another. However, as a process ontologist might see it, these opposites are actually mutual complimentaries—light and dark give rise to each other. Without light, there would be no dark, they rely on each other

¹⁸Rescher, Nicholas. *Process Metaphysics*, 54.

for their being, and this is an ontologically fundamental relation because it is the cause of the “distinct” entities (dark and light).

This view finds expression in much of traditional East Asian philosophy. One example is *yin* and *yang* where “[y]in and yang are not forces or substances, but rather complimentary aspects or *moments* that constitute any orderly, efficient, and 'creative' process.”¹⁹ Yin and yang are essentially thought of as sides of the same coin—male and female, light and dark, being and non-being are only different moments of the same unified whole, or the rhythm of nature. As chapter 40 of the *Daodejing* reads “[t]he events of the world arise from the determinate, and the determinate arise from the indeterminate.”²⁰ I will argue in the next chapter that Native logic also expresses a similar idea where “opposites” are not binary, but mutually complimentary.

Process categories are quite at home with many non-Western traditions. Of course, as we will see in the next chapter, process ontology is inherent in much of American Indian philosophy. In terms of ontology as worldview, we saw a few examples of how substance categories were pervasive in the mainstream of the Western tradition. My contention is that process categories are just as pervasive in non-Western thinking, e.g., East Asian, and American Indian thought. This, among other things, suggests that there is no less sophistication or depth of thought in non-Western traditions, only a difference in approach, or area of emphasis.

¹⁹Moeller, Hans-Georg. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 34.

²⁰Ames, Roger T, and David L. Hall. *Daodejing*. (New York, NY: The Random House Publishing Group, 2003), 139.

It is clear by now that what distinguishes process ontology and its categories from substance ontology and its categories is the commitment to *viewing* objects as fundamentally processual (ontology as worldview). It is not the thing itself that is important, for that is only the concrete manifestation of a myriad of processes, but the processes it is or the processes associated with it. Essentially, an ontology that advances or assumes the primacy of process over substance resonates with process ontology. We have also seen that the categories an ontology emphasizes have implications for the worldview from which it stems. We will see several instances of this in the next chapter as we consider the ontological implications of Native and Western language, “ecology”, story, logic, and epistemology, and how they embody their respective ontologies.

CHAPTER II

American Indian Process Ontology

This chapter explores the ontological implications of language, ecology, story, logic, and epistemology in American Indian thought which, as I argue, indicate that Native thought embraces process ontology. We begin by exploring how the predominately verb-based Native languages resonate with the tenets of process ontology as it has been conceived in this work. Our investigation will show that because many Native languages tend to use intransitive verbs to modify nouns, as opposed to substance languages which use adjectives to modify nouns, they have some processual convictions about the world as expressed through language. We will then look at some ontological implications of Native “ecology”. Here, we will see how Native ecological convictions reinforce the tenets of process ontology we saw in Chapter I. Specifically, we will explore the idea of the Earth as the macroprocess that encompasses all its “objects” or microprocesses. Here, I argue that American Indians do not view objects in the natural world as static, discrete, enduring material entities, but as creative, animate microprocesses interrelated in larger macroprocess. Next, we will look at how Native stories of creation and life suggest a processual worldview. Finally, in exploring some aspects of Native logic and epistemology, I argue that the logic and thinking reflects a world that is not constrained by fixed, physical laws, and discrete, binary logic.

Introductory Remarks On Ontology as Worldview

Here, I want offer some insights from comparative philosophers on the ways in which differing worldviews come about, and how we can view them not as “competing” views, but rather as different, yet equally legitimate views. I also want to reinforce the idea that substance and process ontologies understand and categorize objects and the world equally well. That is, neither a substance nor a process orientation—neither a Western nor a non-Western orientation—better describes reality. Put differently, there are no good reasons to believe that either a process or a substance, or a Western or Native worldview more accurately describes reality. Instead, I like to think of this in terms set-up by Roger Ames' and David Hall's pioneering work in comparative philosophy as illustrated by V. F. Cordova's “star analogy”. Also keep in mind, that my work is not making *judgments* on what an ontology chooses to emphasize. This work is only concerned with what they *do* emphasize and what that suggests about their ontological framework.

In her book, *How It Is*, V. F. Cordova considers how cultures, and thus ontologies, develop such different, and often times conflicting, worldviews from the same field of sensory content. She tells us that:

“[t]he universe exhibits many different characteristics. There are stars that seem static and unchanging; one cultural group may focus on this quality and take it as the “real” aspect of the world. Another may focus on those same stars and notice that there is movement to them, despite their consistency in appearance. The motion becomes more important than the consistent, or unchanging, quality.”²¹

²¹Cordova, Viola Faye. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 101.

Cordova is pointing out that stars do indeed have both the appearance of being static and the appearance of being in flux. Stars glisten and twinkle, but they also have a constant glow that emanates from the night sky. The point she wants to make is that the difference in cultural worldviews arises from the quality each group chooses to identify as more fundamental or important. It also indicates that substance categories and process categories correspond to, and organize the experience of reality equally well—or that neither have any privileged insight over the other. On this view, as well as the Ames-Hall view, that whole line of thought leading to the question—what is reality *really* like?—is useless because there is no privileged position in which a correspondence to reality can be verified in any definitive way, i.e., the God's eye view.

Ames and Hall, have also honed in on this point, presenting it in the focus-field model.²² What the focus-field model implies for our purposes is that in any given field, e.g. the night sky full of stars, there is a plurality of foci. Different cultures tend to privilege or emphasize one quality of the foci and de-emphasize others. So the process philosopher might find the inherent state of flux in stars more important to the nature of stars than, say the substance philosopher, who might see the permanence of their appearance as more important to the nature of stars. This model and the helpful insight from Cordova also offers us a window into understanding what gives another culture's philosophy its credence. Since there is no standard by which to reference, who is to say

²²The focus-field model is presented in numerous publication by Roger Ames and David Hall. I refer to their presentation of the focus-field model as it is given in their philosophical translation of *Daodejing*, 1st. Ed.

that process or substance categories are closer to correctly or accurately describing reality? Furthermore, what good is the question? Cultures develop worldviews not blindly, but with purpose—whatever that may be. There is sense content to every worldview, it is just a matter of what they chose to emphasize.

The second reason for these introductory remarks is to reiterate the substance-process distinction to which the last chapter was devoted. Substance ontologies or worldviews see the world and its objects as static, discrete, inert, and enduring. As we saw in the last chapter, this essentially reduces nature to an inert, mechanistic, physical reality which can be understood in substance-category terms, e.g., static states of being applied to objects as in “the coonhound *is red*”. A process ontology sees the world and its objects as fundamentally processual, i.e., they don't deny the reality of “objects”, just that their fundamental nature is not static and passive, but dynamic and active. On the process view the world is always in process, where everything is interrelated and changing. In what follows I argue that Native language, ecology, story, logic, and epistemology sympathize this latter worldview.

Ontological Implications of Native Languages

“The way we talk about a place or entity reflects how we feel, how we see, how we understand, and most important, how we think in reference to it. Language itself is a reflection of how we organize and perceive the world...”²³ If Cajete is correct, and there is

²³Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishing, 2000), 271. While I would not go to the extent Cajete does to say that language reflects how we feel, see, and understand the world, there is much credence to this statement. I would say that languages

good reason to believe he is, then exploring Native languages will reveal to us some of their most deep-seated ontological convictions about the world. While there is no one Nation's language that represents or best represents the thoughts and worldviews of American Indians as a whole, there is nonetheless strong consistency among them. One particularly telling feature of American Indian languages is the predominance of verbs, i.e., they are “verb-based”. As many scholars point out, in order for Indians to express the world *as they see it*, intransitive verbs are generally used to modify nouns referring to objects.²⁴ This strikes the mainstream Westerner as odd because where the Indian uses verbs, the Westerner uses adjectives denoting states of being to modify nouns, and for quite sensible reasons. As I have been working to show, substance ontology, which is pervasive in the West, tends to see the world as a full of static, discrete, and inert objects. Thus, in a world of objects bound by fixed physical laws, and conceived of as “finished” in the sense that they are static and enduring, adjectives denoting states of being modifying nouns are used, since states of being as substance categories are static and inert.

Native languages, on the other hand, use intransitive verbs to modify nouns. We saw in the previous chapter that intransitive verbs, e.g., 'becoming', 'redding', etc., denote open-ended process of active beings. If we agree with Cajete that language is, at least in part, a reflection of a culture's worldview, and we agree that American Indians' uses of

reflect how the *mainstream* of a particular culture viewed the world in the process of formulating and exacting *their* language.

²⁴ Of course this is only *one* of the many ways Natives relate and communicate their world. I choose this example however because it does well to demonstrate the processual nature of Native languages.

intransitive verbs suggest process and activity, then we can see that they embrace process categories in their ontological framework, or worldview. This, I argue, suggests that they commit to aspects of process ontology by the manner in which their languages characterize and categorize objects in the world.

In his book, *The Dance of Person and Place*, Thomas Norton-Smith argues that the constructivist project of Nelson Goodman offers us a good starting point for a “rational reconstruction” of the American Indian worldview with, however, one caveat. According to Norton-Smith, some of Goodman's criteria for the ultimate acceptability of a world version are culturally biased and thus would exclude an American Indian world from being “numbered among the internally consistent, equally privileged, well-made actual worlds.”²⁵ In order to salvage Goodman's constructivist project from his own cultural bias, Norton-Smith offers a variation on Goodman's “nominalist” constructivism with his own constructive “realism”. I take a look one particularly compelling point of the discussion as it relates to the disparity between verb-based (American Indian) and “adjective-based” (Western) languages.

As Norton-Smith points out:

“[d]enotation, the relation between a symbol and what the symbol stands for or refers to, is the fundamental relation in world making, for the application of labels—names, predicates, gestures, pictures, and so on—identifies the objects and kinds that comprise a world by ordering and categorizing the content of sense experiences.”²⁶

²⁵Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 54.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 22.

So denotation is the activity of predicating and giving names to the phenomena of our sense experiences. For example, when we perceive a rubber sphere with a light frequency approximately between 430-480 terahertz, we call it a “red ball”. When we see an instrument with nylon or steel strings and a wood body, we call it a “guitar”. If we see a non-human animal with four legs, coarse red hair, long floppy ears, and a beautiful howl, we call it a “redbone coonhound”.

At any rate, however, denotation is not a random and anomalous process. Denotation works in conjunction with “an established ontology sustained by past linguistic practices.”²⁷ So the guitar, the dog, and the red ball are so named in accordance with an ontological context dictated by culture. These objects are decidedly static entities to the English speaker, if not most all Western languages. Norton-Smith notes that “English speakers use 'a squirrel' to stand for an enduring individual entity, not temporal stages of squirrels, undetached squirrel parts, an amount of squirrel mass, or even squirrelhood.”²⁸ “Dog” or “red ball”—nearly any modified noun for that matter—always denotes a static object whether it's a group of people, a place in the world, or an object—in particular an object that endures through time.

Recall our earlier discussion of focus and field: within a sensory field there is a plurality of foci, and what distinguishes a culture's ontological tendencies, in part, is the quality of the foci that the culture sees as fundamental to the foci's nature or essence. A

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

Westerner would tend to see the squirrel's temporally-enduring, material persistence as closely linked to its fundamental nature. The endurance of the squirrel is the quality which a Westerner would tend to pick out of the vast field of sensory content associated with it. Note that nothing in the field leads us to believe that that quality most accurately reflects how “things really are”, only that our ontological and cultural tendencies impel us to focus on this or that quality almost always to the exclusion of the others.

Coming back to Norton-Smith, in the beginning of his chapter on Goodman's constructivism he makes a remark about a red cardinal atop the bird-feeder in his backyard. In commenting on the cardinal, an English speaker would say “the cardinal is red”. However, a Shawnee commenting on the cardinal would say “the cardinal reds”. The grammatical reason an Indian would say “it reds” may *seem* quite pale in itself, as “Native Languages are verb based...” and thus simply do not have the same resources for expressing a similar statement.²⁹ Norton-Smith tells us that “Algonquin languages, like Shawnee, lacking the verb “to be”, treat English adjectives like 'red' as intransitive verbs (Wagar, pers. Comm.).”³⁰

Lee Hester, Jr. also cites that “the Choctaw language has no verb 'to be'.”³¹ As one can see, the lack of the verb “to be” is common, if not pervasive, amongst distinct Native

²⁹Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 27.

³⁰Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 22.

³¹Hester, Jr., Thurman Lee. *On Philosophical Discourse: Some Intercultural Musings*, In “American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays”, ed. Anne Waters. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 265.

language families.³² To my mind, what really makes this phenomenon interesting is the implications it has for ontology. We have seen that the recurring theme of this work suggests that in comparison with the static, fixed and finished, worldview of the mainstream West, is the dynamic, creative, and ever-evolving worldview of Natives. Furthermore, as Norton-Smith pointed out, our language, especially denotation, are formed and function within a cultural context and have ontological implications. Put differently, the way our languages are structured, in some ways indicates our ontological convictions about the world. In a world of static, inert, discrete, and enduring entities, a symbol denoting an isolated, enduring substance is fitting. However, a nation like “the Hopi depict a dynamic world of ceaseless and uncaused motion. To portray this world, the Hopi have developed a language largely dominated by verbs.”³³ Cordova goes on to add that “[o]ther American indigenous languages also are dominated by verbs” as we have seen.³⁴

So in a world where the cardinal is not a temporally-enduring, isolated, and inert entity, but an active, creative, and dynamic entity, denotation accommodates the processual outlook accordingly. In speaking of Native ontology, Cajete says that it

“continually relates to and speaks of the world as full of *active* entities with which people are engaged. To our sensing bodies, all things are active. Therefore, Native languages are verb based, and the words that describe the world emerge directly from actively perceived experience. In

³²Shawnee, Choctaw, and Hopi belong to *distinct* language families. So despite belonging to distinct linguistic communities, their languages have all developed without the verb “to be”.

³³ Cordova, Viola Faye. *How It Is*, 100.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

a sense, language 'choreographs' and/or facilitates the continual orientation of Native thought and perception...”³⁵

To express that the processual nature of things, to pick out the active quality which American Indians focus on as being fundamental to things, Native languages found the connotations that “to be” carries inadequate. Instead, they developed languages which “choreographs” or closely mirrors the process orientation that their language commits to.

So far we have seen that the way Native languages characterize objects suggests the primacy of process. If we take language to be a significant reflection of the way a culture views the world, then this analysis should be indicative of the processual tendencies inherent in Native cultures. Recall the second sense of ontology as worldview we encountered in the first chapter of this work. The categories a language preferences in characterizing objects is telling of the ontological beliefs its speakers maintain. We said that substance categories preference static, inert, and enduring qualities while process categories preference dynamic, active, and interrelated processes. These categories are consistent with the worldview behind them in our current analysis. We will now see how the Native preference for active, dynamic, and interrelated categories is manifest in Native ecology.

Ontological Implications of Native “Ecology”

³⁵Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 27.

On the Native view, it is odd to speak of “ecology” as Westerners do. In *Native Science*, Cajete tells us that the term “Native Science” is really an arbitrary term for the “entire edifice of Indigenous knowledge”. In fact, in “Native languages there is no word for 'science' nor for 'philosophy', 'psychology', or any other foundational way of coming to know and understand...” the world.³⁶ Nor is there any particular term for “environmental science” or “ecology”. This is not because American Indians are not concerned with these practices or knowledges as we conceive of them in the West, but because all these practices are part of life—not a science class. As Cajete says, Native science, the whole of Indigenous knowledge, is really like an ecology. Philosophy, science, art, farming, hunting, etc., all relate back to standing in proper harmony with the world. This is not surprising since there is no knowledge for its own sake in the Native tradition. All knowledge is purposive, i.e., knowledge always relates how to harmoniously and non-obstructively participate in a nexus of relationships—to walk the right road.

“[T]he real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along... which individuals were supposed to walk... No body of knowledge exists for its own sake outside the moral framework of understanding.”³⁷

Since many of those relationships are to Earth, the Mother, it is easy to see how vital a role Earth is in the life and thought of American Indians.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷Deloria, Jr. Vine. *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria Jr., Reader*. Ed. Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 46.

What is particularly interesting for our purposes is the way American Indians view the Earth, and subsequently nature for that matter. What I will argue is that on the Native view the Earth is understood as the macroprocess that engenders all of its microprocesses. In a sense, this means that Earth, as an active and interrelated being, is a fundamental process that creates and sustains relationships on the Earth. What is important to note is that this conception of Earth, or better still nature—as a creative, active, and interrelated process—differs from the traditional Western conception of nature. As I argue, the same categories that we have seen pervade other areas of Western and Native thought, are also present in their respective ecologies. We will see ways that Westerners ascribe substance categories to nature, and American Indians ascribe process categories to nature.

We have said that the mainstream West typically commits to substance categories while Natives typically commit to process categories. Substance categories, as I conceive them, express and emphasize the static, inert, discrete, and enduring features or properties of the world.

“[T]he underlying Western ontological assumption about the physical world is that it is material and inanimate, mechanical and rational, amenable to quantitative description and governed by fixed physical laws. It is orderly, fixed, and finished.”³⁸

We can see that the mainstream West emphasizes substance categories by the assumptions it maintains about nature. Nature is thought to be inanimate, and bound to

³⁸Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 47.

the fixed physical laws *we* believe are inherent in it. Of course, this is not to say that *all* areas of Western thinking make this assumption. Many ecologists, biologists, and geologists have recognized the processual nature of Earth, and seeing its furniture as microprocesses as well. However, it is clear which view of nature has dominated the mainstream of the West as evidenced by the technological, political, and scientific comportment our culture has to Earth, e.g., technology that gives us pleasure at the expense of the environment (off-road vehicles), legislation that allows for more waste production (emissions), scientific perspectives that view animals, lakes, trees, and rocks as void of any intrinsic value or meaning, and thus are “resources”.

The West also sees no intrinsic or inherent duty to nature, perhaps in part because we do not emphasize the importance of our relations to Earth. According to J. Baird Callicott, even Aristotle disregards the importance of relationality:

“Relations among things again are, in Aristotle's biological theory, accidental and inessential. A thing's essence is determined by its logical relation within the taxonomical schema rather than, as in ecological theory, by its working relations with other things in its environment...”³⁹

Only when our recent environmental crises have threatened our continued existence, have we become concerned with “ecology” and the ways we tax Earth. This, of course, is not the case on the Native view, for American Indians are keenly aware of the

³⁹ Callicott, J. Baird. *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 184.

interrelatedness of all things, particularly the relations we have to Earth. Oglala Lakota

Leonard Crow Dog tells us that

“[w]e are born from Mother Earth and we return to Mother Earth. We feed on the deer who, in turn, feeds on the grass which, in turn, is fed by our bodies after we die. It's the story of the biological cycle you learn in school. Everything is harmony and unity, and we fit within that harmony. And when our sensing bodies die, our spirits are freed and will be here. You see it's not religion [or ecology] in the white man's sense, but a philosophy of living, a way of living.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, Anne Waters tells us that for the Navajo the

“exchange of breathe is important because all in the universe are related through air, and all are made of the same basic elements. Just as we take in air to breathe, so also we let out breathe, giving back to that from which we take.”⁴¹

Relationality is one of the fundamental aspects of Native life. It extends not only from human persons to Earth, but animals to animals, rocks to trees, breathe to sky, etc. In other words, human animals are not viewed as particularly special animals, so relationships do not merely emphasize human relations to things but the relations of *all* things.

The great majority of Native tribes consider many other things as equally qualified for personhood. However:

⁴⁰ Mencarelli, James and Steven Severin. *Protest 3: Red, Black, Brown Experience in America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 150-151.

⁴¹ Waters, Anne. *Language Matters: Nondiscrete Nonbinary Dualism*. In “American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays”, ed. Anne Waters, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 103.

“the value of human beings is not diminished, but the value of other kinds of entities in the world is enhanced... A Native expansive conception of persons [is one] in which not only animals but plants and places, physical forces and cardinal directions, even the Sun, Moon, and Earth are persons...”⁴²

So on the Native view, not only are all things related, but as John Fire Lane Deer tells us despite the whites who “imagine earth, rocks, water, and wind to be dead, they never the less 'are very much alive'.”⁴³ Non-human objects in the world can be persons, and one property of persons in Native conceptions is being alive, or animate. J. Baird Callicott develops this theme in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*. The “typical traditional American Indian attitude was to regard all features of the environment as en-spirited. These entities possessed a consciousness, reason, and volition no less intense and complete than a human being's.”⁴⁴ He points out that this is an

“eminently reasonable assumption... I can no more directly perceive another human being's consciousness than I can that of another animal or plant. I *assume* that another human being is conscious since he or she is perceptibly like me (in other respects) and I am conscious.”⁴⁵

Callicott is defending the traditional Native assumption that everything is alive because it exists in the purposive world just as they do, and just because it may not appear to comport itself in a fashion acceptable to Western lights is no good reason at all

⁴²Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 78.

⁴³ Callicott, J. Baird. *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 184.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

to assume that it is not alive. What Callicott and others argue is that other objects and beings *do* comport themselves in similar ways to humans. A good example is the story of “Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock” which we will explore in the story section.

What is interesting about the concepts that everything is related and alive is the process ontological commitments embedded in them. First and foremost, to be alive is to be active or animate. We already know that process ontologies view objects as such—objects are active and interrelated entities that are in processes of becoming all the time. This means something as simple as a rock or a smoking pipe can be alive and related to its environment, and can be of equal status to all its relations. We know that animation or aliveness is an important process category and it is clear that Natives view objects as such, but how then does that mean that everything is in or are processes of becoming? In other words, how do we go from saying that American Indian thinking commits to the idea of animation or aliveness, a process category, to saying that this essentially means things are or are always in process? In the next section of this work on story, we will see how animation or aliveness is a way of expressing the American Indian processual understanding of the world and its entities.

This section has shown that Native “ecology” may just as well be Native philosophy, or “way of life” as Leonard Crow Dog says. It is this philosophy or way of living that truly begins to express the fundamental ontological assumptions, or better, the processual worldview of Native peoples. Of course, we may never know the extent to

which they would commit to a strong process ontology, but the next section will provide some compelling reasons to believe that Native ontologies lean towards strong versions.

Ontological Implications of Story in Native Traditions

Story and the performance of story-telling are immensely significant in Native oral traditions. As Norton-Smith says in *The Dance of Person and Place*, story puts Native experience into perspective, and the performance of story-telling contributes to the organizing and understanding of the world. In this section, we will see how the Pueblo mythological figure, Kokopelli, perpetuates and reinforces the importance of process and change in the Native world. Furthermore, I will argue how an Okanogan creation story conveys a processual conception of the world. Finally, we will see some ways in which the story of “Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock”, resonates with a processual worldview.

Cajete thinks that the creation or emergence stories of tribes are most indicative of the processual view they commit to. Kokopelli, “the seed bringer and life symbol of creative energy”, symbolizing that all is in process, is typically found in many Pueblo “first times” or creation stories:

“Natives have always been good observers. They understood that things were always in process, that things were always being created and then destroyed and then created once again in new forms. These basic ideas of science, of evolution, of ways of understanding ecological processes are deeply embedded in symbols like Kokopelli that represent the creative process in nature, human beings, and even the evolution of thought.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 36.

Now, Kokopelli is a Pueblo mythological figure that

“represents the creative process or the creative energy that is part of all things—humans, the earth, and the cosmos as a whole. It is a symbol of the procreative and creative nature of all life, organic and inorganic.”⁴⁷

Kokopelli is found in many creation and “first times” stories, and serves as a personification of process and creativity of the natural world. He is a reminder to the Pueblo people that all is in process, and his presence in story is symbolic of this ontological worldview.

With this understanding, it is simply an implicit assumption based on creation beliefs that things are *in process*, and that this is the fundamental ontological assumption that Native peoples, *in general*, commit to concerning their world. We can certainly be sure at this point that the Native view at least embraces a weak process ontology by acknowledging that they see things as always in process. Of course, the claim that Native peoples embrace strong process ontology, which is probably closer to the truth, cannot be decisively established. Since Native philosophy did not proceed in the same fashion as Western philosophy, the ways in which they expressed the views of their world were quite different, and Natives peoples did not scrutinize and clarify philosophical concepts in the same fashion as Westerners. Distinguishing between being in process and being processes was probably not a pragmatic or meaningful distinction in the Native world, or better still they were not even interested or curious about making such distinctions—it

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 31.

did not help them “walk the right road”. Thus, much more research would be require, especially the vanishing first hand accounts from traditional tribal people, to affirm the claim that Native peoples embrace strong process ontologies.

At any rate, let's explore an Okanogan creation story reported by Ella Clark that expresses the interrelated, processual nature of the Native world which they maintain. As we alluded to earlier, Cajete sees creation and first time stories as manifestations of the worldviews and ontological assumption Indians maintain. “These guiding stories of the “First World” mirror the processes of chaos, [and] creative participation... and bring a deep intuitive understanding of the creative process *inherent in nature and human beings*.”⁴⁸ We will see the Okanogan processual worldview manifest itself in one of their “first times” stories.

“The earth was once a human being: Old One made her out of a woman. 'You will be mother of all people,' he said. Earth is alive, but she has been changed. The soil is her flesh, the rocks are her bones, the wind is her breath, trees and grass are her hair. She lives spread out, and we live on her. When she moves, we have an earthquake. After taking the woman and changing her to earth, Old One gathered some of her flesh and rolled it into balls, as people do with mud or clay. He made the first group of these balls into the ancients, the beings of the early world. The ancients were people, yet also animals. In form some looked human while some walked on all fours like animals. Some could fly like birds; others could swim like fishes. All had the gift of speech, as well as greater powers and cunning than either animals or people... Besides the ancients, real people and real animals lived on the earth at that time. Old One made the people out of the last balls of mud he took from earth. He rolled them over and over, shaped them like Indians, and blew on them to bring them alive. They were so ignorant that they were the most helpless of all the creatures Old One had made. Old One made people and animals into males and females so that

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 13. Italics added.

they might breed and multiply. Thus all living things came from the earth. When we look around, we see part of our mother everywhere...⁴⁹

Aside from the fascinating “fact” that the Okanogan may be conveying the Earth when several types of our hominoids ancestors walked together on Earth, is that this creation story succinctly evidences all which this section hopes to argue. First, because all things came from Earth—humans, plants, rocks, etc.—all things are related, and as we procreate and create we constantly maintain our relations. It should be noted that this story only expresses one dimension of relationality in the Native world—physical relations. However, as Cajete points out relationships are not “just physical, but psychological and spiritual, in that it involves dreams, visions, knowing, and understanding, beyond the simple objectified knowledge of something.”⁵⁰

Deloria points out that it is not just a bare fact to Native peoples that everything is related—the world and its framework is grasped and understood by identifying the relation of everything:

“everything in the natural world has relationships with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it. This concept is simply the relativity concept as applied to the universe that people experience as alive and not as dead or inert. Thus Indians knew that stones were the perfect beings because they were self-contained entities that had resolved their social relationships and possessed great knowledge about how every other entity, and every species, should live.

⁴⁹ Clark, Ella. *Creation of the Animal People*. In “American Indian Myths and Legends”. Edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), 14-15.

⁵⁰Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 75.

Stones had mobility but did not need to use it. Every other being had mobility and needed, in some specific manner, to use it in relationships.”⁵¹

We can see from Deloria two important tenets of process ontology in the Native worldview, and how they relate to each other. Deloria has shown us that animation or being alive, being in process, is vital to maintaining relationships. So it is not the case that objects, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, are static, inert, and discrete beings in the Native world. They are alive, and *must be* in order to facilitate and maintain proper relations. So being in process is essential for relationality—things must be alive for proper and harmonious relationships to exist and flourish. *The ontological implication here shows us that in the Native world objects must be in process in order for relations to exist.* Relationality and process go hand in hand in the Native world, you cannot have one without the other.

The Okanogan creation story conveys how things are constantly changing or in process. Ancients were human and non-human animals freely exchanging and crossing the boundaries of forms—“things were always changing”. Humans were changing into animals and vice versa, the Earth was a human being, but was changing too. This expresses the fluid conception of the nature of beings and objects in the world which Natives embraced. In the Native worldview “[t]he wall that separates the human and animal worlds is thought to be thin. Consequently, it is believed possible for humans to

⁵¹ Deloria Jr., Vine. *Spirit and Reson*, 34.

transform themselves into animals...”⁵² and vice versa. The fluid conception Native peoples have about entities in the world reinforces the idea of objects in process.

Another example of the fluid conception American Indians have about entities in the world is found in the story Jenny Leading Cloud tells us of “Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock”.⁵³ This story is an example of a rock that *did* have to become mobile to correct his relations. In short, Coyote and Iktome came upon an old and powerful rock, Iya, which caught Coyote's attention. Coyote, who was in an uncharacteristically giving mood, gifted Iya his blanket. Coyote said “he looks good in *my* blanket”, and Iktome corrected him saying “*his* blanket, now”. As the day went on, the weather turned for the worst and Coyote found himself freezing in the cold rain. Coyote asked Iktome to go get his blanket back with no success. Coyote, enraged, then went himself to ask for it back, but again Iya said “no I like this blanket, what is given is given.” Now as Iktome knew Iya was a very powerful rock, but Coyote took the blanket from Iya and went off.

Coyote and Iktome enjoyed the rest of the afternoon eating and smoking, until they heard a loud, powerful rumble that was getting closer and closer. It was Iya, coming to flatten out Coyote and Iktome for being so disrespectful. Iya chased them through the woods, and soon Iktome, seeing the hopelessness of the situation *transformed* into a spider and went into a hole in the Earth. Soon, as Coyote grew tired, Iya rolled over him and took the blanket back, saying “so there!” We can see that some rocks are and can become

⁵²Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 151.

⁵³Leading Cloud, Jenny. *Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock*. In “American Indian Myths and Legends”. Edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), 337-339.

animate in the Native world. This story also expresses the fluid nature or status of beings and object in the world. Iktome transformed into a spider, and Iya, in response to Coyote became locomotive. Furthermore, we see again that everything is related. Coyote's actions do not only affect himself, but even the physical world—Iya the rock responded to Coyote's disrespectful moral action.

An aspect of the Okanogan creation story which also finds expression in the story of “Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock” is that “the Earth is alive”, yet changing. This is explicitly expressing the processual nature of Earth and by extension of relationality, all things are changing with her—even rocks like Iya are alive and changing, Coyote's friend Iktome is changing all the time too. Finally, but not exhaustively, human animals are depicted as most helpless, relying on their relations more than many other entities. This tells us how important relationality is for American Indians, and also how they view of their position in the natural world, i.e., not a specially divine trans-human, but an equal to all of nature, which for them, is divine, but not in the sense Western Christianity understands it.

“Creation stories reflect a kind of “natural democracy”, in that rather than presenting humans as the gifted and favored species of the world, the special traits of plants and animals are regularly depicted again and again with mention of human dependence upon them.”⁵⁴

This section explored some process-ontological convictions inherent in Native traditions through story. We saw that process is a fundamental feature of reality that is of

⁵⁴Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 34-35.

immense importance in the Native worldview. We also saw how process or animation is the vital impetus for the interrelatedness of all things. Through stories, we see a conception of the world as alive, always changing, not bound to fixed laws, and is full of interrelated, animate entities. Finally, we saw how animation or aliveness, is, essentially, a Native expression of the inherently processual world.

Ontological Implications of Native Logic

In this section, we will explore ways Native non-discrete, non-binary dualist logic evidences the process tendencies I have argued are inherent in the Native world. This analysis will show two things: 1) that Native logic, being non-discrete and non-binary, avoids rigidly categorizing entities or concepts in a static, and discrete manner, as is the case in mainstream Western logic, and 2) that this demonstrates or expresses the process-ontological tendencies which undergird the Native worldview because in the Native world which is always in process, it would be “somewhat reckless”, Norton-Smith says, “to extend even the most well-verified regularity into the future with unflinching confidence...without constant verification.”⁵⁵ That is to say, because the world is always in process, Native reasoners express this fundamental ontological conviction by employing a logic which is not *fixed*, and bound to discrete and binary categories and predicates.

⁵⁵Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 47.

First, let's be clear about what it is meant by a “non-discrete, non-binary dualist logic”.⁵⁶ In a Native non-discrete, non-binary logic, for any property or category, p , p and not- p are not regarded as opposites, but as mutual complimentaries, e.g., being and non-being, male and female, are complimentary. “A non-binary dualism would place the two constructs together in such a way that one would remain itself, and be also a part of the other.”⁵⁷ In other words, p does not necessarily exclude not- p . Actually, p can be, or be a part of, not- p at the same time without contradiction! This means that the Western logical laws of the excluded third and the law of non-contradiction do not apply to non-binary complimentary logic—and for good reason as we will see.

Furthermore, there is no extra value or emphasis placed on one conjunct over the other—e.g., being is not necessarily more perfect or better than non-being: since this logic is non-discrete, e.g., the boundaries between p and not- p are *fluid*, “an hierarchical valuing of one being better, superior, or more valued than another cannot be, or rather is, excluded by the nonbinary [complimentary] logic.”⁵⁸

These two forms of deductive logic (classical Western two-valued semantics, and Native non-discrete, complimentary dualist logic) have peculiar implications for their respective views on “facts” to which statements refer. On the Western account something either is or is-not, and cannot both be and not be at the same time. This means items, e.g.,

⁵⁶This is Anne Waters term used in her article *Language Matters: Nondiscrete, Nonbinary Dualism*.

⁵⁷Waters, Anne. *Language Matters: Nondiscrete, Nonbinary Dualism*, in “American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays”, ed. Anne Waters, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 98-99.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 99.

logical conjuncts or entities in the world, are conceptualized as discrete—sharply divided—with clear boundaries amongst them. This not only de-emphasizes the importance of relationality in Western logic, it also manifests the way Western deductive reasoners organize and categorize objects and concepts in their ontology as worldview. Objects and concepts either are or are-not something, and stand in sharp isolation from each other. Native “deductive” logic or non discrete complimentary logic, on the other hand, conceives objects and concepts in a much less rigid manner, and the reason they are not so rigidly conceived is because they view the world as fundamentally interrelated and processual.

Let's look at Anne Waters' example of an instance where a non-binary complimentary dualism exists in Native thought, and how that expresses their relational and processual worldview. She tells us that “[m]any Indigenous gender categories are ontologically without fixed boundary. They are animate, nondiscrete, and grounded in a nondiscrete and thus nonbinary dualist ontology.”⁵⁹ Waters looks at the Chipewyan perspective on gender categories and finds that, in fact, gender is not simply a fixed given, “gender becomes”:

“Males must achieve the status of maleness by attaining *Inkoze*. They do so by displaying behavior appropriate to having the knowledge of *Inkoze*. To have *Inkoze* is to attain respect; it is achieved via performance. Prior to attaining *Inkoze*, men do not have gender.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 109.

So gender is a fluid category in this tradition; furthermore gender is a *process*. One is not simply male *or* female, those without gender are *neither*, this of course defies the Western notion of the excluded third as it relates to gender. What's more, gender *becomes* through *process*, the fate of a genderless person *is not fixed*.

Norton-Smith argues that Native inductive logic has significant ontological implications for Native worldviews. He explores Deloria's discussion of the Western syllogism: "Socrates is mortal because all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man".

"Western inductive reasoners project natural kinds with great confidence, especially when based on an exquisitely well-established regularity; what Western inductive reasoner would *seriously* doubt that all men are mortal, all emeralds are green, or that open flames burn uncovered skin?"⁶¹

Now, an American Indian commenting on this would ask how one could assume that *all* men are mortal, if one has yet to meet all men? The possibility is still open for an American Indian that perhaps there is a mortal man and we do not know he is immortal, or we have simply not encountered him ourselves yet. One of Deloria's points is that there is no more plausibility to the claim that "all men are mortal" than the claim that the possibility of an immortal man remains. However, for the American Indian, the future is not fixed, the world isn't finished, thus:

"Native inductive reasoners are more cautious about projecting natural kinds like "men" and "mortality", and the possibility of a nonmortal man

⁶¹ Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 46.

is a real possibility. So, one cannot accept it on faith that Socrates is mortal and a man like I am; one must verify.”⁶²

In the Native world, there is very good reason to be cautious about projecting predicates and natural kinds into the future, and that reason ought to be clear.

“Because the [Native]... world is animate, creative, and constantly unfolding [i.e., always in process], it would be somewhat reckless to extend even the most well verified regularity—to project the most well-entrenched predicate—into the future with unflinching confidence (as would a Western inductive reasoner) without constant verification.”⁶³

The Chipewyan might insist on this point because we do not know if a genderless person will attain *Inkoze*, so their fate is open.

Hallowell would also agree with this point. Although not all rocks are animate for the Ojibwa, the possibility is open and some rocks are actually encountered as animate. So the discrete and binary dualism of rocks as animate *or* inanimate, but not both, collapses because rocks, trees—the whole universe—is always in process, and, as we know, Native conceptions of process are never fixed and finished. Thus, the possibility for rocks to be animate or inanimate is always open (recall the story of Iya the rock). Of course, this is only for the Ojibwa.⁶⁴ We saw Deloria, a Lakota, tell us that *all rocks are*

⁶²*Ibid.*, 46.

⁶³Norton-Smith, Thomas Michael. *The Dance of Person and Place*, 47.

⁶⁴ See Irving R. Hallowell discussion of animate rocks in *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View*. Beginning on pg. 25.

animate, but most of them have resolved and perfectly balanced their relations and have no need to use their powers associated with animation.

In this section we have seen that the nature of Native logic evidences process-ontological tendencies in Native worldviews. Since the world is unfixed and unfinished, i.e., the world is in process, much more *caution* is required in projecting predicates and natural kinds. Furthermore, “opposites” (by Western lights), e.g., *p* and not-*p*, are not opposites but mutual complementaries—which is suggestive of Indians strong sense of relationality. We remember that *the* most common theme in American Indian philosophy is relationality—“everything is related”, even seemingly diametric opposites like *p* and not-*p*. While we can speculate, the fact that non-discrete, non-binary dualistic logics compliment a process-worldview—and that such logics exist in the tradition—evidences a commitment to process ontology.

Ontological Implications of Native Epistemology

Not surprisingly, Native epistemology closely parallels Native logic's motivation for avoiding rigid, discrete, and fixed categories. In this section we will see how Native epistemology is *inclusive*, rather than exclusive, and why this is significant for a processual orientation. To say that Native knowledge is inclusive means that it includes *all* data, rather than excluding what may seem irrelevant or misleading by Western lights. “In formulating their understanding of the world, Indians did not discard any

experience... Indians believed that everything that humans experience has value and instructs us in some aspect of life.”⁶⁵ So even things like poetry, hunting, dreams, art, music, and more have something important to tell us about the world.

“All aspects of human expression [and experience] have something to tell us about the best way for us to live. In this way, they are all philosophy... Because philosophy, literature, science, and religion are one in American Indian thought, we cannot truly separate the medicine from the magic nor the philosophy from the poem.”⁶⁶

Now, one of the reasons Native epistemology is inclusive is because the Native universe is *moral*. Vine Deloria, Jr. tells us:

“[t]he real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along... which individuals were supposed to walk... No body of knowledge exists for its own sake outside the moral framework of understanding.”⁶⁷

In other words, seeking knowledge was not a matter of uncovering or creating natural laws or descriptions of how the world *really* is, but was a useful way of understanding one's place on earth, and how to best conduct oneself. In a world where everything is related, this means understanding your particular place in the nexus of relationships (your relation to other humans and non-human animals, the natural world,

⁶⁵ Deloria, Jr. Vine. *Spirit and Reason*, 44-45.

⁶⁶ Burkhart, Brian Yazzie. *What Coyote and Thales can teach us*, in “American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays”, ed. Anne Waters, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 23.

⁶⁷Deloria, Jr. Vine. *Spirit and Reason*, 46.

your ancestors, etc.) that constitute your world, and knowledge, in its various forms, will always have something to tell us about how to harmoniously proceed in it.

So in the Native world, seeking and obtaining knowledge is an activity which always relates back to understanding how to participate harmoniously in the web of relationships. Now this does not seem entirely different from the West's quest for knowledge. After all, Westerners want to understand nature so that they can effectively survive in the world as well; this is, however, the point of departure. Westerners seek to understand nature so as to control it, Native peoples seek to understand nature so as to be a complimentary, non-obstructive participant *of* and *in* it. For example, even illness in traditional American Indian cultures was attributed to an imbalance with one's environment, whether social or ecological. An important objective of healing was to bring one back in balance with the rest of nature/society, i.e., the nexus of relations. So healers wanted to *understand* the nature of herbs, plants, and practices *so that one could regain proper balance in their web of relations*.

It is clear from this that knowledge, even in areas like medicine and healing, always relates back to the all-important moral goal of walking the right road, or participating non-obstructively with the world.

“The entire realm of healing—the application of plants, and the understanding of the roles played by the healer—exemplifies an ecological dynamic revolving around establishing and maintaining relationships not only to one's own healing process but also to spiritual, communal, and environmental healing processes. Healing traditions

provide a benchmark in terms of expression of the intimate relationship that Native peoples established with their environment.”⁶⁸

What is important for our purposes is to see just how fundamental relationality is, even in Native epistemology. Identifying and understanding relations is vital to nourishing those relations. So Native epistemology is inclusive in this sense because in the Native world, where everything is related, it would be a mistake to assume that somethings may not be important or useful for nourishing and maintaining relationships.

A second reason Native epistemology is inclusive is because the world and everything in it is always in process. For very much the same reason Native “deductive” logic is non-discrete, and Native inductive reasoning is much more cautious in projecting predicates and natural kinds, Native epistemology is inclusive. This line of reasoning goes as follows: if the world is always in process, which means things are fluid and always changing, then one never can know what might be useful or helpful information or data. Thus, knowledge must be inclusive.

In the processual world, knowledge must be flexible to accommodate inevitable changes of processes. Native/process approaches exclude *nothing* from knowledge because in an ever-changing world, more caution is required in extending past regularity into the future, and one never knows what an “anomalous” experience might teach us. Moreover, if everything is interrelated, then things that might not reveal their relations to

⁶⁸Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science*, 122.

us now, may later, and we must be “epistemically-prepared” to understand what that relationship might mean.

Another compelling point about Native epistemology and its parallels with process thinking is Cherokee Brian Yazzie Burkhart's conception of the enterprise itself found in his article “What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us”. He tells us that Native epistemology itself *is a process*. This process is the synthesis of *all* data and experiences, and knowledge is essentially an on-going, *and never finished*, painting of *only a general* picture. He notes that “[i]n Native philosophy and science, however, there are no real anomalies or contradictions.”⁶⁹ He tells us that:

“Anomalies are only really possible once we have a finished picture and claim that this picture represents something about the world, that is, gives us a general picture of the world. For Native philosophers, this would be to stop doing philosophy, to stop observing, and to make some arbitrary claim that there will be nothing else to observe... If we never stop thinking and observing, then there will always be room for new experiences. No matter how strange these experiences may seem, they will never be contradictory since there is nothing for them to contradict...”⁷⁰

Burkhart says that this is why Native epistemology is processual—because it is never complete, never finished and never fixed by arbitrary pronouncements. It is also a process because it is a constant synthesis all data and experiences, and as he notes, the experiencing never stops, so, in general, nor will the knowledge. What is interesting is that this evidences not only the strong notions of process inherent in Native thinking, but

⁶⁹Burkhart, Brian Yazzie. *What Coyote and Thales can teach us*, 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

also how Native worldviews and Native ontological convictions seem to engender, or are at least present in, even their epistemology.

At the end of this section we find two compelling arguments for process in Native epistemology. The first is that Native epistemology *expresses* process-ontological convictions based on their inclusive stance on data and experience, that is, the world is always in process, so knowledge should respectfully proceed with this understanding. The result is that knowledge does not and cannot exclude anything from consideration not only because the world is always in process but also because everything is interrelated. The second argument is that Native epistemology is itself conceived of as a process. Just like so many other aspects of Native thought we have explored, epistemology, just like rocks for example, are thought to be alive, a process in itself. We can see the tendencies of a processual worldview informing or influencing even the epistemology of American Indians.

Conclusion, Closing Remarks, and Reflections

This work has attempted to show: 1) a detailed examination of what process ontology is and what it means, 2) that American Indian worldviews commit to process ontology and process thinking in general, and 3) that American Indian worldviews are as legitimate and rigorous as Western views, and have legitimate content to undergird their

views. As mentioned, we may never know the extent to which American Indians would accept strong versions of process ontology, although the strong process language found in Cajete's work, and others like Cordova and Deloria as well as the many oral stories which expressed the fundamentally fluid nature of beings and objects in the world such as the story of "Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock", suggest that Native worldviews sympathize more with strong versions of process ontology.

An unfortunate, but inevitable consequence of this type of work is that the very portrayal of Native thinking as processual and Western thinking as "substantial" appears to make even the processual nature of Native thinking static, just like the categories we explored in Western thinking. That is, process is a static property of Native worldviews. However unfortunate it may be, in doing comparative philosophy it is, again, an inevitable consequence. I, in no way, see process as a static property or quality of Native worldviews. Rather, I see the presence of process commitments as living, *but not fixed*, indications of the nature of their worldviews.

We warned in the introduction to this work that cross-cultural comparative philosophy inevitably makes broad generalization that cannot speak to the subtleties of different cultures. Western thought is not always so rigid and non-processual, just as Native thought is not always so fluid, and processual. However, there is so much strong evidence for dominant tendencies in each culture that broad generalizations are very useful for teasing them out, especially when juxtaposed, rather than looking at them independently. Many cross-cultural comparative philosophers have found that the easiest

way to begin explaining non-Western cultures is by contrasting them with Western culture. There is, no doubt, much diversity among Western cultures, just as there is much diversity among Native cultures.

I think motivations are an important part of larger projects like this one, and my motivations in this work are something I would like to make clear. Non-Western philosophies have really gained interest in the past couple of decades, and Native philosophy has probably been among the slowest and smallest to come about, and this is not because of a lack of passionate, dedicated, and rigorous scholarship, or, as we have seen, a sophisticated worldview worthy of recognition and study. While I don't wish to speculate here, I do wonder why when I go to the bookstore I find only a handful of books on Native thinking and culture, and it is under the African-American studies section. It gets me wondering about the way American Indians have been handled and kept largely under the rug by the U.S. Government. It gets me wondering why academia is so slow to represent and ensure that Native worldviews are present among the other non-Western traditions in universities. It gets me wondering why religious and theological texts and courses say nothing about Native "religion".

At any rate, my motivation for doing this project is two-fold: first, to understand and present aspects of Native philosophy to the best of my ability, and second, to offer a way of interpreting Native ontology in terms of process ontology. My hopes for this project are that it will serve as an interface for comparative philosophy to find sympathies and resonance between Native and Western thought. This is not to say that we need to

compare Western thinkers with Native thinking to give them credence. Rather it will show that the level of thinking going on in Native traditions is on par with even the most recent developments in Western philosophy.

I was tempted at the beginning of this project to focus on the parallels between Western process thinkers, e.g., Bergson, Dewey, James, Heidegger, Whitehead, Heraclitus, to name but a few, however, this project seemed more useful. I found that while Native thinking is, as I hoped to have shown, thoroughly process-oriented, there was no literature that could *directly* speak to that. If we can at least say that Native thinking is processual then the dialogue can begin. Again, my motivation for doing this project is to understand and present American Indian thinking to the best of my ability and to offer one way of understanding Native ontology, i.e., through process ontology.

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