

The Moral Epistemology of First Nations Stories

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Abstract

One way to view the importance of storytelling in First Nations cultures is to look at the epistemology that informs storytelling and, more generally, practice in those cultures. Listening to the First Nations voices of Carol Geddes on respect, Louise Profeit-Leblanc on responsible truth, Vine Deloria on principles of epistemological method, and Deloria and Lee Hester on the centrality of belief in the West in contrast to the centrality of practice, experience, and story in indigenous worlds suggests that storytelling should be central to environmental education, ethics, and practice.

Résumé

Une façon de considérer l'importance de l'art de raconter dans les cultures des Premières Nations consiste à examiner l'épistémologie qui informe cet art et, plus généralement, la pratique dans ces cultures. L'écoute des voix des Premières Nations, comme celle de Carol Geddes sur le respect, de Louise Profeit-Leblanc sur la vérité responsable, de Vine Deloria sur les principes de la méthode épistémologique et de Deloria et Lee Hester sur la centralité de la croyance dans l'Occident par contraste avec la centralité de la pratique, de l'expérience et du récit dans les mondes autochtones, suggère que l'art de raconter devrait se situer au centre de l'éducation environnementale, de l'éthique et de la pratique.

I

I teach environmental ethics and First Nations philosophy. I came to think about and teach First Nations philosophy in part because I was dissatisfied with environmental ethics as it had unfolded within the Euro-American analytic tradition. I came to take it as axiomatic (in the logical or mathematical sense¹) that a culture that has not been environmentally ruinous in its long membership in the Earth community must (whether explicitly or implicitly) have a sophisticated and effective ethic concerning its presence and practice as member of the Earth community. And so, I have drifted further and further from mainstream environmental ethics and deeper and deeper into First Nations philosophy. Sticking with my axiom has proven to be enormously fruitful.

At the heart of my story is *Story*. In correspondence concerning the Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communication 2001

Conference, Bob Jickling asked how I like to teach environmental ethics. Although I hadn't expressed it this way until Bob asked, my answer was immediate: I teach with stories. My own stories enter in here and there, but mostly I use the stories of others, most of whom I regard as elders within my own Euro-American culture. At the moment I use Aldo Leopold's (1970) *A Sand County Almanac*, Gary Snyder's (1990) *The Practice of the Wild*, Wendell Berry's (1977) *The Unsettling of America*, and Freeman House's (1999) *Totem Salmon*. To introduce the notion that a culture is best understood as a people enacting a story relating humans, nature, and the sacred, as well as the basic contrast between stories rooted in fear and stories rooted in trust, I use Daniel Quinn's (1992) novel *Ishmael*. Through all of this I thread lessons from Indian Country—lessons about the epistemology of stories.

I ask my students to try on these stories by Leopold et al., to wear them for a while, see how they fit, see what differences they make to their perception and sense of being-in-the-world. The first story I use is Gary Snyder's (1990) "The Woman Who Married a Bear," in which Snyder tells a version of the story based on a telling by Maria Johns to the anthropologist Catherine McClellan. Snyder then retells the story, the same story in many ways, but with additions of his own: folding in some bear facts drawn from contemporary biology and adding "and neither should men" to Maria John's comment that "Girls had to be careful about bear droppings, they shouldn't walk over them," to cite just two examples (p. 155 & p. 163). He tells his own version of the story as one who has led his own particular life, and he therefore wears the story in his own particular way. He does not tell the story as an artefact to be "appreciated" and "understood" from the point of view of privileged Euro-American discourse. The difference between Snyder's telling and Maria John's is the difference between two distinct trails through the world, not the difference between the telling of the story by a "believer" and a social scientist's report of the "beliefs" or "world views" of an indigenous culture.

Most students, once they understand what is being asked of them, find it easy to live within the ambience of this story (at least for a time, until other stories reclaim them). They are not being asked to subscribe to the belief that humans and bears can mate, for example; nor are they being asked to translate the story into terms consistent with contemporary Euro-American belief. They are simply asked to live within the "world" of the story, to live on its terms. This exercise makes it possible for students to read Leopold, Snyder, Berry, and House as stories of lives lived—lives lived within larger lives, stories within larger stories—rather than as arguments in competition with one another.

But some stories are destructive, not conducive to ecosystemic health. The story that Western Culture whispers in our ears—so says *Ishmael* (Quinn, 1992)—is that the world was made for man and man was destined to conquer and rule—a tragic scenario that excludes other stories and reduces a rich

and varied ecosystem in the direction of monoculture. How do we evaluate stories? How do we tell good stories with (and about) our lives? How do we learn to tell comedic stories (see Part III) of the Earth and its human and other-than-human citizens?

How should we understand stories? They seem, many of them, to be at once descriptive and evaluative. They orient us, it seems, by telling us what our world is like and how we might be good citizens within it. They may seem to point to moral norms suggested by (or derivable from) presumably true (though storied) accounts of the world. Other stories—some would cite “The Woman Who Married a Bear” (Snyder, 1990)—seem to be merely prescriptive: they are simply storied forms of telling us what we ought to do.

Some answers to these two sets of questions are suggested by elements of First Nations epistemology.

II

Anthony Weston and I have recently argued that the standard understanding of the relationship between ethics and epistemology is mistaken. The standard view, in part, is that ethical action is a response to our knowledge of the world. Knowledge comes first; then, and only then, practice. Ethical arguments presuppose or articulate some factual situation to which the question is what our appropriate response is to be. That natural ecosystems, for example, may show integrity, stability, or beauty, as a matter of fact, is supposed to be the basis upon which we can “consider” them ethically. That animals feel pain, or are self-conscious, or have expectations that can be violated, is supposed to be the basis upon which they might be attributed rights. Indeed, to speak of a “basis” in this way is only a way of underlining the necessity of some factual appeal, some empirical starting-point. Often an object’s or system’s alleged possession of “intrinsic value” is itself supposed to be a kind of fact to which ethical action responds. That even the “possession” of value itself is thereby treated as a kind of *fact* illustrates just how taken-for-granted the fact-based model of ethics currently is (Cheney & Weston, 1999).

We argued, on the contrary, that ethical action is first and foremost an attempt to open up possibilities, to enrich the world. It is not an attempt to respond to the world as *already* known. On the usual view, for example, we must first know what animals are capable of, then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On the alternative view, we will have no idea of what other animals are actually capable—we will not readily understand them—until we *already* have approached them ethically: that is, until we have offered them the space and time, the occasion, and the acknowledgment necessary to enter into relationship. Ethics must come *first* (Cheney & Weston, 1999).

Epistemologies have ethical dimensions, so there is an ethical dimension to knowledge itself. Within a particular epistemology knowledge is constructed in accordance with particular ethical values, principles, views, or practices; to articulate an epistemology is to articulate an ethical practice. As exemplified in the methodology of the controlled experiment, much of the knowledge gathered in the name of modern science is shaped by the values of domination and control (Cheney, 1998). The knowledge of patterns in nature arrived at by patient observations in the field (as in phenology) and reciprocal dialogue within the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996), on the other hand, gives voice to other values. The “worlds” constructed by differing epistemologies can be radically dissimilar (Hester & Cheney, 2000).

The ethical dimensions of epistemology itself have rarely been attended to, or even noticed, by Euro-American philosophers. One exception is Nietzsche, who, in §114 of *The Gay Science*, said that “All experiences are moral experiences, even in the realm of sense perception.” Another important exception is Tom Birch’s (1993) notion of “universal consideration.” Because the self-proclaimed concern of ethics is to discover what things in the world demand practical respect, we must *for that reason alone*, Birch says, “consider” them in the most fundamental way: by paying close, careful, and persistent attention. Thus all things must be considerable in this basic and unavoidable sense. Indeed, rather than any new potential considerandum having to meet a burden of proof, universal consideration requires us to reverse the usual burden of proof as we approach others in the world. “Others are now taken as valuable, even though we may not yet know how or why, until they are proved otherwise.” Actually, even more deeply, universal consideration requires us not merely to extend this kind of benefit of the doubt but actively to take up the case, so to speak, for beings so far excluded or devalued, rocks included. Once again ethics is primary: ethics opens the way to knowledge, epistemology is value-driven, not vice versa (Birch; Cheney & Weston, 1999). To put Nietzsche together with Birch, universal consideration must inform our very *perception* of the world, it must shape our ways of knowing the world, our epistemologies.

While Euro-American philosophers have for the most part paid scant attention to the moral dimensions of epistemology, First Nations peoples, on the other hand, can readily be understood as having paid *close* attention. Imagine a deep practice of universal consideration for all things, a consideration that is not instituted as a moral principle or rule governing behaviour, but is, rather, a dimension of one’s very *perception* of the world. Such a conception is present in the notion of “respect” for all beings that is pervasive in First Nations cultures. To Western ears, the term “respect” may have overtones of hierarchically-structured relationships, or it might have a Kantian flavor of obedience to moral law. But to indigenous ears it signifies a mode of presence in the world the central feature of which is *awareness*, an awareness that is simultaneously a mode of knowing—an epistemology—and what might be

called a “protocol” or mode of “comportment,” as Carol Geddes (1996) explained in response to a question concerning the meaning of the Tlingit notion of respect: “it does not have a very precise definition in translation—the way it is used in English. It is more like awareness. It is more like knowledge and that is a very important distinction, because it is not like a moral law, it is more like something that is just a part of your whole awareness. It is not something that is abstract at all” (p. 46).

Given the value-laden nature of epistemologies and their multiplicity, what shall we say about the knowledge that emerges from their use? Do these epistemologies deliver truths about the world? Louise Profeit-LeBlanc’s response to a question posed to her concerning whether the stories she used in her work with at risk children were “true” is revealing. In her response, she used the Northern Tutchone term *thi an oh* (usually glossed as “what they say, it’s true”) and defined it as meaning “correctly true,” “responsibly true” (a “responsible truth”), “true to what you believe in,” “what is good for you and the community,” and “rings true for everybody’s well-being” (in conversation). In the notion of a “responsible truth” we have a straight-forward acknowledgment of the ethical dimension of knowledge itself, one that ties the notion of truth to individual and community well-being and what a person stands for.

Putting Carol Geddes’ remarks together with those of Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, we can perhaps say that what we in the West might think of as the “search for truth” is, in First Nations cultures,² better understood as a search for many-layered responsible truths arrived at by means of an epistemology of respect for all beings.

In a series of remarkable articles recently collected in *Spirit & Reason* (Deloria, Foehner, & Scinta, 1999), Vine Deloria characterizes the nature of responsible truths and develops the epistemology of respect required to arrive at them. “The real interest of the old Indians,” Deloria says:

was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person’s life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe. That is to say, there is a proper way [or “there are proper ways”] to live in the universe: There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief. The sum total of our life experiences has a reality. There is a direction to the universe, empirically exemplified in the physical growth cycles of childhood, youth, and old age, with the corresponding responsibility of every entity to enjoy life, fulfill itself, and increase in wisdom and the spiritual development of personality. Nothing has incidental meaning and there are no coincidences. . . . In the moral universe all activities, events, and entities are related, and consequently it does not matter what kind of existence an entity enjoys, for the responsibility is always there for it to participate in the continuing creation of reality. (p. 46-47)

“All knowledge, if it is to be useful,” Deloria says, “was directed toward that [moral] goal” (Deloria, Foehner, & Scinta, 1999, p. 43-44). In the block quotation above, Deloria builds a picture of the world around this central moral goal.

Most Euro-Americans would call this picture Deloria's (or the Dakota) "world view." I want to offer an alternative to this idea, one that is more consistent with First Nations epistemology. There are two elements to this alternative: (a) the notion of "ceremonial worlds" (my term) and (b) the notion of "principles of epistemological method" (Deloria's term).

Ceremonial Worlds

The concept of a "ceremonial world" is built around two further notions (as Lee Hester puts it in Hester & Cheney, 2001): "[1] the importance of direct experience and [2] agnosticism concerning belief" among First Nations peoples. "Within the life history of maturity," Deloria says, explicitly critiquing Western science as articulated by Thomas Kuhn (1970), "one can be said to travel from information to knowledge to wisdom. Organisms gather information, and as the cumulative amount begins to achieve a critical mass, patterns of interpretation and explanation begin to appear. . . . Here it is that Western science prematurely derives its scientific 'laws' and assumes that the products of its own mind are inherent in the structure of the universe. But American Indians allow the process to continue, recognizing that premature analysis will produce anomalies and give incomplete understanding" (Deloria, Foehner, & Scinta, 1999, p. 14). At the point where "patterns of interpretation and explanation" begin to emerge, the epistemological methods of Western science and First Nations epistemological methods part ways. In Western science (and philosophy) *belief* enters the picture and the theoretical map is taken as a *true* account of the territory. For First Nations peoples, the map is not understood as a true picture of the territory.

As Lee Hester (Hester & Cheney, in press) puts it:

I would characterize the attitude of Native Americans as one of agnosticism concerning the relationship between their map and the territory. Though this may seem strange from a western stance, it is actually very practical. . . .

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

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

Possibly the most telling example is the kind of response that a traditional Native person will give in answer to a question. I don’t know how many Indian related conferences I have been to where some non-Indian academic will ask a medicine-person or elder a question. The response they seek is a statement of the way things are, a truth, a detailed map of the territory. The answer that they get is a rambling narrative. . . . The narrative is generally a story from their own life, maybe with a few traditional side stories. . . .

Knowledge is a narrative of a life lived in the world. The individual stories are what you know. They may or may not provide a map of the world, but they do tell you about the consequences of your actions. You can learn much even if you believe little. You can even be taught. (Hester & Cheney, in press)

What I have called a “ceremonial world” (Cheney, 1999; Cheney & Weston, 1999) is a comprehensive map. Ceremonial worlds are the worlds (comprehensive maps, stories) within which we live, the worlds that have the power to orient us in life. They define for us the nature of the sacred (that in which meaning is located, the more-than-human dimensions of our worlds), the natural, and the human, and the relationships between them. A ceremonial world is an actively constructed portrait of the world intended to be responsibly true, one which rings true for everybody’s well-being. It is a world built on the basis of an ethical-epistemological orientation of attentiveness (*respect*) rather than an epistemology of control. Such ceremonial worlds, built, as they are, around the notion of responsible truth, are synthetic creations, adjusted holistically to all the concerns that arise from a focus on responsible truth: they must tie down to the world of everyday practice and experience in a way that makes it possible to survive; they must orient the community and its individuals on roads of life that allow for the flourishing of all members

of the community, as far as that is possible. The metaphysics or ontology of such a world will not be understood as true in the modern sense of the term. The issue is always (if implicitly) whether it is responsibly, or correctly, true; whether it is action guiding in the full sense just delineated.

Principles of Epistemological Method

The block quote from Deloria (above) depicts a ceremonial world. Within this ceremonial world some elements have an epistemological function. Deloria is explicit about this and coins the wonderful term “principle of epistemological method” (Deloria, p. 44) to refer to them. Deloria provides a nice example of such a principle in his discussion of the well-known phrase “‘All my relatives’ [*mitakuye oyasin*], which is used as an opening invocation and closing benediction for ceremonies. ‘All my relatives’ . . . also has a secular purpose, which is to remind us of our responsibility to respect life and to fulfill our covenantal duties. But few people understand that the phrase also describes the *epistemology* of the Indian worldview, providing the *methodological basis* for the gathering of information about the world” (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 52; emphasis added). Deloria is clear that this “gathering of information” does not cast humans in the role of sole knowers and all else in the role of objects known: information “gathered” is the result of reciprocal communication within a more-than-human world.

Many statements coming from First Nations worlds that Euro-Americans would understand to be statements of *belief* (truth claims) concerning First Nations worldviews are best understood as principles of epistemological method. First Nations thought on the notion that the universe is alive, for example, is truly remarkable. “It cannot be argued,” Deloria says, “that the universe is moral or has a moral purpose without simultaneously maintaining that the universe is alive. The old Indians had no problem with this concept because they experienced life in everything, and there was no reason to suppose that the continuum of life was not universal” (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 49). Is this a scientific claim with supporting experiential evidence? A metaphysical worldview? Not likely in view of our discussion to this point. But First Nations thought concerning the notion of a living planet is more revealing:

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

The humour (as well as the seriousness) in Deloria’s twist on Western criticisms of anthropomorphizing nonhuman nature by attributing “superior” human characteristics to it are, I hope, obvious.

If speculation and analogy end where First Nations peoples end it, then the idea of the living earth isn't even speculative: It is obvious on the face of it. Not that it can't be denied, but at that point speculation, theory construction, or metaphysics is necessary. Casting humans as "lesser" beings puts another twist on the matter: It folds the idea of the living earth into a ceremonial world orienting First Nations peoples on the moral road. The notion of a living world is not part of a First Nations *worldview*—a truth claim—it is an everyday observation fitted into a ceremonial world in a way that enhances its epistemological effectiveness. "Coming last, human beings were the 'younger brothers' of the other life-forms and therefore had to learn everything from these creatures" (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 50).

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

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

These conclusions aren't forced upon us by the notion of a living universe, of course, but they are the sorts of conclusions one might expect within a ceremonial world built around the moral purpose of "finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk." They extend in quite natural ways the general attitude of universal consideration discussed earlier as a feature of First Nations worlds. When Deloria says that by employing various principles of epistemological method we "gain insights and knowledge about the real essence of the earth" (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 50) he is not speaking of deep *truths* about the world; rather, he is speaking of a deeply practical map of the world, a ceremonial world.

III

I conclude with a few thoughts concerning environmental education, ethics, and practice suggested by the "moral epistemology" sketched above. These thoughts constitute an endorsement of Carol Geddes' (1996) remark that the Tlingit "would never have a subject called environmental ethics; it is simply part of the story" (p. 32).

1. Western environmental education, ethics, and practice is, by and large, modeled on the notion of an epistemology- or knowledge-based ethic: We first come to understand the way the world *is*; only then do we deduce our ethical responsibilities to that world.
2. First Nations practice begins with an epistemology that is *already* ethically informed, an epistemology employed in a search for *responsible* truths by which individuals and communities might survive, “seek life” (Beck, Walters, & Francisco, 1990, p. 47), and find the proper road upon which to walk so that they may “act responsibly toward other forms of life [and] seek to establish communications and covenants with other forms of life on a mutually agreeable basis.” This epistemology is one of respect or universal consideration that is made explicit in principles of epistemological method embedded in ceremonial worlds.
 - 1a. The type of knowledge appropriate to Western environmental education [(1), above] is an understanding of “the abstract structure of physical reality” (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 46). The role of experience of the natural world within the dominant Western environmental education paradigm is to connect the abstract knowledge from which an environmental ethic is derived with the lived experience of the child and to generate a lived sense of the “land-community” (Leopold, 1970) and of the student as part of that community.
 - 2a. The knowledge appropriate to First Nations practice [(2), above] is already ethically informed and is knowledge that is not abstracted from the lived experience of the whole person. Borrowing Holmes Rolston’s (1988) words and folding them in with Hester’s, we can say that “an [indigenous] ethic is not . . . a theory but a track through the world” (p. 349). “[L]ogic will be mixed with story. The [Western naturalistic] move from *is* to *ought* . . . is transformed [in indigenous philosophy] into movement along a story line” (p. 342). “Knowledge is a narrative of a life lived in the world. The individual stories are what you know” (Hester & Cheney, in press). Individuals may tell their own stories or pass down the stories of others. We grow and learn by sharing and reflecting on stories: *Stories are what we know*.

Stories within the dominant Western paradigm of environmental education are merely tools for educating students up to (what is thought to be) the real thing: a proper scientific understanding of the land-community and the ethic that follows from this understanding. Stories within First Nations cultures, on the other hand, *are* the real thing.

At this point I want to add a final, and vital, element to the story I have been telling. As I mentioned in Part I of this paper, I have my students read Leopold, Snyder, Berry, and House as stories of lives lived—lives lived within larger lives, stories within larger stories—*rather than as arguments in*

competition with one another. Stories in relationship to one another behave more like elements of ecosystems than like arguments squaring off against one another. Joseph Meeker suggests that biological life is essentially comedic and that survival may depend upon human conformity to this biological norm. For example, basing his analysis on a classical understanding of comedy, Meeker (1997) says that:

Evolution proceeds as an unscrupulous, opportunistic comedy, the object of which appears to be the proliferation and preservation of as many life forms as possible. Successful participants in it are those who live and reproduce even when times are hard or dangerous, not those who are best able to destroy enemies or competitors. Its ground rules for participants, including people, are those that govern literary comedy: Organisms must adapt themselves to their circumstances in every possible way, must studiously avoid all-or-nothing choices, must seek alternatives to death, must accept and revel in maximum diversity, must accommodate themselves to the accidental limitations of birth and environment, and must prefer cooperation to competition, yet compete successfully when necessary. . . . The comic way is to be found in evolutionary history, in the processes of ecology, and in comic literature, which may represent the closest we have come to describing humans as adaptive animals. Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon our ability to change ourselves rather than our environment Comedy is a strategy for living that contains ecological wisdom, and it may be one of our best guides as we try to retain a place for ourselves among the other animals that live according to the comic way. (p. 20-21)

So with stories: they are (or can be) comedic instruments of survival. It seems to me that an account of knowledge and ethics that revisions these along comedic or ecosystemic, evolutionary lines, since it mirrors the very ecosystems that are the concern of environmental ethics, is far more likely to succeed than an account of knowledge and ethics that is conceptually (and tragically) at odds with that which it would “save.”

Notes

- ¹ That is, following Webster, understanding an axiom as “a proposition that is assumed without proof for the sake of studying the consequences that follow from it” rather than as “a self-evident truth that requires no proof” or as “a universally accepted principle or rule.”
- ² Such generalizations are the author’s. See the “acknowledgments” section for other disclaimers.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the pen of Anthony Weston. Much of the material in the present paper that is drawn from our co-authored article (Cheney & Weston, 1999) was written by him. Mostly, however, the author wishes to acknowledge the inspiration and ideas of First Nations philosophers that inform this paper. I do not know whether I have served those ideas well or ill, but either way it is most certainly true that I have not grasped them in their fullness. I have, moreover, used these ideas to address issues in Euro-American environmental education and philosophy, not as they live within First Nations cultures. This application of First Nations ideas has no doubt transformed the ideas themselves in some measure. The only true authorities on First Nations thought are First Nations peoples themselves.

Notes on Contributor

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