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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Agnes B. Curry
UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH

RECKONING

As I assemble the articles in this newsletter in late June, the temperatures at my current home in Connecticut are much more like Kansas in late July than the early days of a breezy New England summer. The Pacific Northwest has just endured a heatwave unprecedented in its temperature spikes and resultant patterns of death for both humans and non-humans. In the weeks and months since the previous newsletter was published, parts of the US and Canada have been venturing into more post-pandemic conditions—while in Mexico, as of June 27, only 15 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated. Some of us who teach have been told to plan for on-ground teaching in an ostensible “return to normal” while others have been informed that Hy-Flex is the new normal for their foreseeable futures. We mourn the toll of the Delta variant as it shatters the new normal for their foreseeable futures.

In “Truth, Rootedness, and the Good Life in Aztec Ethical Philosophy,” Dr. Sebastian Purcell of SUNY Cortland intervenes in an interpretative dispute regarding the meaning of nelli, a key term for understanding the Aztec conception of the good life. Most succinctly, is the good life for Aztec thought a true life, or is it a rooted life? And given the paucity and indeterminacy of linguistic evidence, to what other, additional sources should we turn for answers? Utilizing several diverse strands of evidence to build his case, Dr. Purcell argues that metaphors of rootedness are more illuminative of Aztec philosophy of the good life, though an action-oriented concern with truth also plays a role. And, pertinently, the constellation of concerns with truth as pragmatically oriented, and with rootedness as grounded stability, issue in a conception of the good life that does not seek to deny or escape the risks and fragility of life, but rather to respond more wisely to the reality of our situation. As Purcell notes, “The Nahua response to our evidenced failures is to learn how to lead a true life, how to take root on our slippery earth so that we do not fall.” One might suggest that to pretend otherwise would seem a patent case of personal or cultural immaturity.

Maturity and the path of maturation as only through recognition of the ubiquity of moral relationship to all beings and powers is discussed by Dr. Anne Schulherr Waters in the article that closes the newsletter, “Sacred Metaphysics and Core Philosophical Tenets of Native American Thought: Identity (Place, Space), Share History (Place, Time), and Personality (Sacred Emergence of Relations).” From her vantage point of longtime involvement in the field, Dr. Waters articulates eight tenets of Native American philosophy she sees in its current unfolding. As summarized in the abstract she has supplied,

We experience the world in cycles of energy (powers) and identity (place) that produces particular personality (behavior, for example, of corn). There results relationships of personal, particular, sacred, and moral behavior. Relationships make the world a moral world. We experience time in a world of cycles of power (energy) and place (identity), wherein relationships of being to one
Another are made as we mature. This is how we develop a personality (metaphysic) of how things are in the world (by completion of relationship) and this is how we mature, like the corn ripens and like others respond by fulfilling our relations.

Again, maturation is only within relationship to others and to the slippery earth. Let us hope we grow up soon.

NOTES


APA COMMITTEE CHAIR’S REPORT

Andrea Sullivan-Clarke
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

Hensci! (Greetings in Muskogee!) As of the first of July 2021, we have approximately eleven members in our group. Although we are a small committee, we undertook a few projects in 2020-2021.

A statement of solidarity with Black Lives Matter for the fall 2020 issue of the newsletter.

An Author Meets Critics Session at the Central Division meeting featuring Shay Welch (Spelman College) and her book, The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology. Shay’s critics were Alejandro Santana (University of Portland) and Sebastian Purcell (SUNY Cortland).

A Book Symposium at the Pacific Division meeting featuring Brian Burkhart (University of Oklahoma) and his book, Indigenizing Philosophy Through the Land. The session was chaired by Alex Guerrero (Rutgers University) with comments from Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Georgetown University) and Andrea Sullivan-Clarke (University of Windsor).

An APA Committee Session at the Pacific Division meeting on Indigenous Philosophy: Land, Relations, and Obligations. The session was chaired by Andrew Smith (Drexel University) with papers from the following:

- Christopher Kavelin (Macquarie University), “Dreaming Law: Transdimensional Relational Jurisprudence”
- Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Georgetown University), “So You Want to Decolonize the Discipline?: Land Back and Academic Philosophy”

Andrew Smith (Drexel University) has agreed to represent our committee in the APA Virtual Programming Slack Group. Our session is in the works.

Establishing a monthly social via Zoom. Committee members can check their e-mail for information.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work with such a great bunch of people. Mvtol! (Thank you!)

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

We invite you to submit your work for consideration for publication in the Newsletter on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy. We welcome comments and responses to work published in this or past issues. We also welcome work that speaks to philosophical, professional, and community concerns regarding Native American and indigenous philosophies and philosophers of all global indigenous nations.

Editors do not limit the format of what can be submitted; we accept a range of submission formats including and not limited to papers, opinion editorials, transcribed dialogue interviews, book reviews, poetry, links to oral and video resources, cartoons, artwork, satire, parody, and other diverse formats. In all cases, however, references should follow the Chicago Manual of Style and include endnotes rather than in-text citations.

For further information, please see the Guidelines for Authors available on the APA website. Please submit material electronically to Agnes Curry (acurry@usj.edu). For consideration for the Spring 2022 newsletter, please submit your work by January 15, 2022.
ARTICLES

A Case of Epistemic Injustice

Andrea Sullivan-Clarke
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

Over the past academic year, part of my service to my university included sitting on a committee that considered the name change of one of the residence halls on campus. The building in question was named after the first prime minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald. In recent years Macdonald has come under scrutiny with respect to his role regarding the cultural genocide of Indigenous people in Canada. As a result, his name and likeness have been removed from Canada’s currency as well as several statues and buildings across the country.

At the end of the academic term, our committee presented its recommendations to the University of Windsor’s Board of Governors. Ultimately, the board decided to remove Macdonald’s name from the residence hall, to install a plaque explaining the history of the building and the reason for changing the building’s name, and, lastly, the board created a new committee to proactively examine the names of other campus buildings. For a junior professor like myself, it was the first taste of enacting change at the university. There was only one issue: the announcement regarding the removal of the name was not made immediately to the general public; it did not come before the news of a mass grave of 215 Indigenous children at the Kamloops Indian Residential School shook the country.

Macdonald’s legacy was one that endorsed the complete assimilation of Indigenous people in Canada. He was a proponent of the residential school system, so when my university issued a formal statement about the events at Kamloops, the Indigenous community was quick to point out the inconsistency of issuing such a statement while also honoring one of the people responsible for not only the genocide of Indigenous culture, but for the actual genocide of Indigenous children. It did not look good for the university: some individuals suggested that the name change was suspiciously close to the revelation at Kamloops—perhaps the university was responding to the university in a bad light? I contend that there is more to this story than meets the eye.

As a social epistemologist, however, I also think that the government and institutions of higher learning could do better; they could improve their relationship with Indigenous people by actively listening to and accepting the testimony of Indigenous people regarding their firsthand experience of oppression. In addition, universities should recognize the likelihood of their actions resulting in epistemic injustice, especially given that institutions of higher learning are steeped in the behaviors connected with settler colonial society. What I mean by epistemic injustice is the discounting of testimony by individuals and communities as a result of their social identity.

As an example, we might ask, “Why was the response to the news of Kamloops so profound?” Why were non-Indigenous Canadians shocked by the revelation? Indigenous students, families, and communities have shared stories of children disappearing from residential schools for years. Some of this testimony was provided to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which resulted in a report and calls to action. Regarding those who were surprised by the identification of a mass grave at Kamloops Indian Residential School, I think we should ask ourselves, “Why is the firsthand testimony of Indigenous people discounted?” Is there some identifiable feature or set of features that prevents the uptake of information when that information is tendered by an Indigenous person or community? It would seem having experienced the oppression firsthand, Indigenous people would be in the best position to provide information.

It is not only the stories of the mistreatment and abuse at residential schools of which Canadians should be aware. What about firsthand accounts of missing and murdered Indigenous women, historical accounts of relationships with land, stories of how the people came to be on Turtle Island (and so much more)? In my research, I often come across articles in the news that confirm what Indigenous people have been saying all along. So what is it about Indigenous testimony that prevents its uptake? I think the question needs to be reframed: What is it about settler society that it rejects testimony from Indigenous people?

One point that I wish to consider regards the day-to-day interactions with Indigenous communities and how the government and institutions of higher learning can prevent a further erosion of trust. The events at my university speak to a lack of communication, which can be easily resolved when we respect the relationship we have with others. The Indigenous students, faculty, staff, and those in the local community look to the university to respond to their concerns, worries, and even demands. In the case concerning the name of the residence hall, they expected a response to their call for changing its name.

Although I can assure everyone that our committee did indeed put forth recommendations to the board of governors and that these recommendations were accepted, I cannot articulate the emotional toll the recent events had on the local Indigenous communities, faculty, staff, and students. There is a lack of faith in Indian Country that institutions will do the right thing. I think that lack of faith has developed as a result of years of disappointment. Indigenous people have expectations that treaties will be honored, promises will be kept, and that they will actually have a seat at the table. Time and again, they are disappointed. Thus, I do not think that their mistrust is misplaced. And therefore I do not blame those questioning the motives of the university.
Here’s the rub: the university appears to fail to address the concern when it actually has responded; the board had voted to remove the name. In the example, the failure to inform the public caused the Indigenous group to spend their energy and resources on an issue that had been resolved. The university’s failure to inform also serves to diminish the future claims of the Indigenous individuals and communities. For example, individuals calling the university’s actions into question are told they are mistaken (when they have been given no evidence that is the case). In turn, the Indigenous communities and individuals are set up to look as though they are misinformed or do not know what they are talking about. I suggest that the putative lack of knowledge affects assessments of reliability; those who have been wrong in the past are assessed as unreliable. In order to prevent the silencing of Indigenous people as a result of denying their credibility as testifiers, governments and institutions should respond in a timely manner to the individuals and communities who present their concerns. It may be the case that the building of trust and the strengthening of the relationship trumps the need to develop a public statement. In such circumstances, the institution should take the initiative, provide the needed information, and contribute to the development of trust in the relationship. As regards changing the name of the residence hall, the university’s failure to inform the Indigenous students and alumni who had created a petition to remove the name put the stakeholders in an awkward position—the Indigenous students and alumni were seen as mistaken at a time when their energies could have been used elsewhere given the gravity of the recent incident at Kamloops.

NOTES
2. See the site for the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation, University of Manitoba, http://www.trc.ca.

Truth, Rootedness, and the Good Life in Aztec Ethical Philosophy

Sebastian Purcell
SUNY CORTLAND

Consider the following two translations of the same flower song, the same xochicuicatl, recorded in the Romances de los señores de la Nueva España.

The Nahuatl Text

Çã toteycnelia • / aca çã tlahuacoya/ ynpalnemohuani / yu cuix nellli / cuix no amo nellli / ñi conitohua y / maoc onetlami ytoyolo / yehuã ohuaya ohuaya

õxquich í ye nelii quihuiya / yu amo nellli / çoân ononequeñi ipalnemohuani / maoc onetlami ytoyolo / yehuã ohuaya ohuaya

Miguel León-Portilla

Are You real, Are You rooted?
Is it only as to come inebriated?
The Giver of Life: Is this true?
Perhaps, as they say, it is not true?
May our hearts be not tormented!
All that is real, all that is rooted, they say that it is not real, it is not rooted.
The Giver of life only appears absolute.
May our hearts not be tormented because He is the Giver of Life.

John Bierhorst


How many does he “yes” and “no”! This Life Giver is intractable. [But] let our hearts keep sorrowing.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the translations derive from separate texts. They do not, but the interpretive difficulties are such that translations of the Aztec “flower songs” (xochicuicatl) tend to be holistic in character.

To give one a sense of the difficulties involved, consider the following points. The “•” in the original marks a letter that has been blotted out and cannot be distinguished. The frequent superscripts, for example with “ă” or “q,” are part of the original transcriber’s shorthand and mean that either an “n” or “m” follows. Unfortunately, these superscripts are not used with much consistency and appear to be used sometimes unnecessarily. Different words may in fact be recorded, as a result, without any way to be certain apart from contextual clues. The xochicuicatl poetic structure, finally, has untranslated vocables, “yehuã ohuaya ohuaya” in this case, and these sometimes include “y” or “i,” which may be the grammatical particles “yn” and “in,” or mere vocalic song. These are but a few of the transcription difficulties involved and they prove, unfortunately, to be the most tractable.

The more worrisome difficulties are conceptual in character. Miguel León-Portilla understands these verses, attributed to the legend of Nezahualcoyotl, to turn on a quest for truth and rootedness. On his understanding, this xochicuicatl is a philosophical poem. He uses both “real-true” and “rooted” as a sort of hendiadys for the Nahuatl term nelli. The core view guiding his translation, then, holds that the singer is on a quest, at once epistemic and ethical, to find truth in our human circumstances on earth.
Bierhorst’s translation, by contrast, is patently anti-philosophical. For him, the Nahua were not a philosophical people, but a religious one. Moreover, their religion was shamanistic, not doxastic, and relatively unsophisticated. While the quoted translation reflects a moderated form of Bierhorst’s “ghost song” thesis, which he advanced in his earlier work, it remains broadly in that line. The discussion of truth and the search for a good life, unsurprisingly, vanishes from view. The term “nelli” in Nahua is sometimes used adverbially for emphasis, just as in colloquial English expressions such as, “I really need to go.” This emphatic interpretation, then, is how Bierhorst chooses to render the term. What is at stake in these two verses, as he sees it, is whether and how the singer can please Life Giver using the xochicuicatl as a sort of mystical incantation.

Because textual interpretation poses such difficulties, evidence from the texts themselves tends not to settle these larger disagreements. Evidence instead must appeal to broader forms of fitness and coherence among multiple types of evidence among multiple texts, histories, worldviews, and recorded archeological findings.

In the present case, one bit of linguistic evidence might count against Miguel León-Portilla’s philosophical interpretation. In his translation the term nelli is treated as related to nelhuayotl, which is the word for a root or base. Recent considerations circulating among Nahua language specialists, however, cast this connection into doubt. If true, the result would not neutralize Bierhorst’s ghost song thesis, but it would threaten to undermine much of the philosophical interest in these poetic songs. Rootedness is thought to function as a basic metaphor among the Nahua for the good life, and their sense of truth is thought to be way-seeking, i.e., oriented towards action, more than proposition verifying. León-Portilla’s interpretation helpfully spelled out this connection, but it would stand largely unsupported without the linguistic connection between nelli and nelhuayotl.

In light of this challenge, my purpose is to defend León-Portilla’s philosophical thesis in a broad way. I shall not defend the linguistic connection, both because the philosophical point can sidestep the discussion, and because the linguistic dispute may never have enough evidence for a definitive resolution. My strategy is rather to support the philosophical view by drawing on a family of related evidentiary items. I hold, in brief, to a constellation view about the Nahua’s expressions of truth and the good life.

To explain, a little, what I have in mind, it proves helpful to recall that the Aztecs, or better the Nahua, who were the Mesoamerican people who spoke Nahua, often employ a constellation of metaphors to indicate a main idea. One may witness this in the poetic expressions called difrasismos in Spanish, which use two main terms to indicate one idea. The terms ixtil, yoilitl, for “face and heart,” for example, are meant to describe the core of a person, especially in their capacity as an ethical agent. Yet, one witnesses that these terms are often compounded with related bodily terms. In one of the discourses in the Discourses of the Elders that Andrés de Olmos records, one reads “neighbors with quinequei immixtzin, moyollotzin, immonacayotzin . . . / Much does your face, your heart, your body reclaim. . . .” Even longer compounds are recorded, but they all express the essence of a human person.

Something similar has happened elsewhere in Nahua scholarship with respect to the symbolic expressions recorded in codices. Eduard Seler’s 1904 commentary on the Codex Borgia forwarded the view that the many gods were all expressions of a single main god, a sort of first principle. Miguel León-Portilla developed this claim by showing evidence for Ometeotl as that one god. Both claims were disputed, but Henry B. Nicholson later worked out a schema—or symbolic constellation—for all the gods with ometeotl as the basic entity of existence. I think that much the same type of constellation is at work in the Nahua’s expressions of the good life. Because the discussion is complex, it might be simplest to begin with a review of the basic linguistic objection.

1. ON NELLI AND NEHUAYOTL

In his dictionary entry for nelhuayotl, Remi Siméon writes that the term means a “principle, foundation, base, root, and genealogical origin.” He also puts the following down: “R. nelli (?)” This is the dictionary’s abbreviated method for indicating that the root of the term might be nelli, though Siméon is uncertain. If accurate, then it suggests that there is a linguistic connection between the word for truth, nelli, and the word for a root or base, nelhuayotl. It is this connection that Miguel León-Portilla’s translation takes to be accurate.

The linguistic difficulty with this approach may be stated in two prongs. The first concerns the recorded semantic coverage between the terms. Much of the semantic space covered by nelhuayotl and related terms, notably nelhuatli, appears to be devoted to physical roots and bases, not abstract terms like truth. Even the reference to principle, which is the primary meaning in the dictionary, is not quite truth.

There is further dictionary support for the connection between the nelhuayotl and truth in extended cases. Siméon does record that when used with “-c” or “-can,” as in inelhuayoc and inelhuayocan, the term means “at its root” or “at its base.” When further used with the verb aci, it means “he or she verified, examined to the root.” It is this notion, verification as going to the roots, that makes sense of the compound nelhuayotoca as “searching for the origin, the principle of something, searching for the truth.” Still, truth tends to emerge in these cases only in conjunction with other verbs. It would be helpful if there were some discernible morphological connections to support the semantic evidence.

A first thought might follow from the apparently strange way in which the “-yo-” in nelhuayotl doesn’t appear to give the term the abstract sense one would expect. Rather, just like nelhuatl, it can be used to indicate a physical root. This physicalizing sense, as opposed to the more typical abstracting sense one would expect, is closer in function to what one witnesses with intransitive state nouns, which sometimes use the “-yo-” affix to indicate the physical manifestation of a more abstract phenomenon. The verb tona, for example, means “to prosper and bear fruit.”
When made into a state noun, totonacayotl, it means “a crop,” totonacayo means “our crop,” and totonaca, notably without the “-yo-,” means “our prosperity.” The difficulty that follows from this line of analysis, however, is patent: these intransitive state nouns use “-ca-” to nominalize a verb, while in the present case one must explain how the “-hua-” is removed from nelhua-yotl to arrive at the root nelli. There may be something else at play in these cases, but it is not clear what that would be.

The linguistic challenge has thus already moved onto its second prong. The first prong, which is semantic in character, might be strengthened if a suitable morphological connection is discovered. Thus far, the problem that has emerged is that nelli, the stem of nelli, looks manifestly nominal in character. If this is right, then it becomes unclear how the -huayotl elements are related to it. If one takes the view that nelli and nelhuayotl are two unconnected words, then there is no need for an explanandum. If they are related, then it looks as though one must take the -hu-portion as part of a verbal element. In that case, the nel- might be embedded in it. Perhaps, in the broader family of Uto-Aztecan languages, there is some such connection. At present, there are no studies which confirm it.

These points suggest that while there is some semantic support for Miguel León-Portilla’s translation and Siméon’s hypothesis, it is not as strong as one might wish. Nelhuayotl only appears to mean getting at the truth when an additional verb is introduced, whether aci, “to reach,” or foca, “to accompany.” The morphological evidence would appear to require further research into Uto-Aztecan languages, and it is not clear that such evidence will ever be forthcoming.

Since the possibility for a connection between nelhuayotl and nelli is present but uncertain, it might prove more fruitful to look for alternative sources of support beyond the linguistic. What I propose is that there is a constellation of prevalent metaphors in Nahua philosophical literature that supports the view that the good life is what, in English, we might call the rooted life. I hold that this is the view which makes the most sense of what the Nahua huge held was the basic problem of the human condition, namely, that we are beings who slip up, who fall.

**DO NOT FALL**

León-Portilla’s analysis was originally developed from a philosophic interest. In book six of the *Florentine Codex*, the earliest of the volumes Sahagún and his team recorded, one finds the following common sayings accompanied by their glosses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quen vel ximjmatla in titeocujtlamjchin.</th>
<th>“How goes it? Look to yourself well, golden fish.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iquac mjtoa: intla aca quinjima nelhacuyotl</td>
<td>It is said when, if someone at some time was leading a good life, but later fell—perhaps he took a paramour, or perhaps he knocked someone down and that person became sick, or even died, and because of this the one who knocked him down had to go to jail—then it is said “How goes it? Look to yourself well, golden fish.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The term for “good,” in the phrase “leading a good life,” is qualli, also spelled cualli, and it is an object noun derived from cu, to eat. The idea of goodness at work in the passage, then, is close to what we in contemporary English might call “wholesomeness.” The reversal at stake, then, is from a wholesome life into a harmful one.

Since the gloss references the passage just above in the codex, it makes sense to look at that one too. The saying just above in the codex reads as follows:

For most the puzzling portion of the passage concerns the phrase “golden fish.” Some evidence suggests that certain animals were treated as possessing divine qualities, and color terms sometimes indicate the same point. In this case, “gold,” teocuicatl, literally means the excrement of gods, so the interpretation is not implausible. If any of that analysis is accurate, then the phrase is sarcastic. It means something along the lines of “How’s it going, Mr. Perfect? Take care of yourself now.” Even if this is not a sarcastic statement, so that perhaps the golden fish is something both prized and fragile, what is at stake is the sense that anyone can fall on hard times. These hard times, moreover, include cases that in contemporary philosophy are classed as cases of moral luck. Slipping up thus introduces the inescapability of moral luck as a permanent feature of the human condition.

León-Portilla’s translation and analysis of the *xochicuicati* “poems” attributed to Nezahualcoyotl, including the one that opened this essay, develop an answer to this problem. Their point is not to extirpate the fragility that is constitutive of our condition, but to find wiser ways to manage it. The Nahua response to our evidenced failures is to learn how to lead a true life, how to take root on our slippery earth so that we do not fall. The connection León-Portilla proposes, then, is philosophically sensible, even if it does not have the linguistic support one might wish. There are other passages, however, which link falling down to a lack of prudence in the moral sense.

In the *Primero Memoriales*, which were an initial collection of statements that later became polished portions of the *Florentine Codex*, one can read various discourses of the elders. This is a genre of writing unique to Nahua culture, as a Platonic “dialogue” is unique to the “West.” In one
of these discourses, two noblemen address each other. One reads that when they quarrel with each other, they admonish each other saying,

\[
\text{Oc xicaq' nicauhtzine y} \\
\text{iehoatl tiquitoa y motiatol} \\
\text{camo tlachia can iuqui} \\
\text{tixtepelt taactiuetzi ca} \\
\text{xitlamatinnemj macamo} \\
\text{xixtotomaoa ximimati} \\
\text{ximixtili camo tonemiliz.}
\]

The term for precipitous in this passage is \text{taacti-uetzi}, which is related to the verb \text{uetzi}, to fall. The notion at work, then, is that one is acting too quickly, in the way that a fruit falls from a tree, without forethought. When noble women admonish each other, they similarly say "\text{ma ca no ximovetziti, noconetzin ma ca no ximotlamachtitinemi / don't fall! My child, live reflectively.}"

León-Portilla’s basic insight, that a life well-lived for the Nahuas is one that at least seeks some way to avoid falling so often, is both sensible and well-supported. For the Nahuas, one means for doing so was to live prudently. In contemporary philosophical jargon, one might put the matter this way: the performance of a good life is enacted through virtuous living. Rootedness would appear to be a tantalizing metaphor to express a life well-lived in this manner. It receives further confirmation in Nahua tree metaphors.

**THE CEIBA AND THE AHUEHUETE**

The Nahuas specifically identified two sorts of trees that metaphorically represented ideal human beings. The first was the ahuehuete tree, or as it is also called, the Montezuma cypress (\text{taxodium mucronatum}).

It is unsurprising that the Montezuma cypress is Mexico’s national tree. If you have ever stood in the presence of a great ahuehuete, or any similarly large tree, then you will have experienced the sense of calm and awe that surrounds them. Their size, sometimes that of a full city block, is arresting. Their thick trunks exemplify what it means to be sturdy, to stand firmly rooted in the earth. And while children play in the shade the tree provides, adults often use that same shade to take a moment of repose.

The second paired tree is the great silk cotton tree (\text{ceiba pentandra}), also called the great ceiba.

The great ceiba, though somewhat smaller in size, is no less arresting, since it often stands above the canopy forest below it. Tall and firm, the tree prominently displays its massive root structure, which anchors it to the earth. Among the Maya, who shared the broader Mesoamerican culture with the Aztecs, the ceiba served as the image of the mythical world tree, which united the heavens and the underworld to our own middle earth.

The ethical sense of these great trees emerges from our experience before them. To understand how the Nahuas articulated it, one might look to a pair of statements in discourses by elders to younger people. The first is from the sixth volume of the \text{Florentine Codex}. A newly appointed king, having been instructed by elders, now takes his turn as a speaker and addresses his new subjects, teaching them how to live. A little more than halfway through his long speech, the king begins to describe ideal lives of men and women. They are descriptions that are conceptually similar to what philosophers in the “West” have called the great-souled person, or the magnanimous individual. The king speaks as follows:

\[
\text{Auh in acovic, in tlalchivic itto, in nelli nammacho, tâmacho:} \\
\text{in pochtol, in avevetl muchioa, in jtloc inaoac} \\
\text{muchioa, in jtloc inaoac} \\
\text{necalaqujlo.}
\]

In the discourses that Fr. Andrés de Olmos compiled, one reads a similar description when one nobleman teaches another about the good life.
These are different ceiba trees. The first is in Guatemala, the other in Palm Beach, Florida.

Auh in axcan ma xicmochichili, immymoilotzin, immonacayotzin, ¿ac nel ipan ticmocahuiliz? ¿Ac nel ticmottilia? Ca ye titenantzin, ca ye titettatzin; ca ye titlaczacaltia, ca ye titlachuapahua, ca timalcoche, ca tipeutchi, huey immocuexcan, huey immomamahuaz, ca tipochotl, ca tihuehuetl.

And now, strengthen your heart, your body. To whom, in truth will you leave the mandate [of your office]? Whom, truly, will you observe? For you are already mother and father of the people; you already educate the people, you instruct them. You are he who has the charge, who has the shields. Great is that which you bear; great is your responsibility, because you are the ceiba, the ahuehuete.

In both passages, the charge of rulership is likened to the activity of the ceiba and the ahuehuete. The ideal nobleman and ruler is one who is rooted firmly in the earth so that he or she can act as a shelter for others, and weather the storm of disasters that are likely to assail any leader’s tenure.

A person who can learn to take root as the ceiba and the Montezuma cypress is thus the ideal for anyone who will lead a life successfully on the slippery earth. This person will also, in another metaphor, learn “to stand on their feet.”

STAND ON YOUR FEET
The opening discourse that Andrés de Olmos records is a long speech from a father delivered to his son. He seeks to teach his young son how to live well. The metaphor the father chooses to express a life well-lived is to learn to stand on one’s feet. He states the following.

Ye qualli, ye yectli, xicmocuitlahui in tlalticpacayotl; xitlaay, xitlatequipano, xiquaquah, xelimiqui, xinopaltoco, ximetoca; ye tiquiz, ye ticquaz, ye ticmoquentiz, ye yc tihcaz, ye yc tinemiz.

Excellence requires that you take care of worldly things. Work, labor, collect firewood, plow the fields, plant nopales and magueys. It is from that that you will drink, that you will eat, that you will be dressed. It is with that that you will stand on your feet and live.

What I am here translating as excellence is the disfrasismo, qualli, yectli, the good and the straight. The context for the discussion, then, is clearly one that concerns ethical philosophy. The goal for a life led in this way, standing on one’s feet, thus quite naturally serves the function of what contemporary philosophers call the good.

The father later reinforces this notion by detailing what will happen if his son does not learn to stand on his feet. He states that “Ca yc tixamaniz, ca yc tipoztequiz in tlalticp / you will come to ruin, you will break on the earth.” And in the next paragraph he tells his son the consequences of not living well, “Ca intla yuh ticchiuazin, ca ahmo yc titlacaquizaz / Because if you act thus, you will not emerge as a human being.”

The end envisaged, then, is not like John Stuart Mill’s conception of happiness. While teleological in character, the highest good for a Utilitarian is external to the actions of the agent. It is an average of mental states, as a pot is a product external to the actions of the potter. The Nahua’s understanding of the good life, by contrast, is internal to the action itself. It is like a dance on the world’s stage. There is nothing left over, external to, the dance itself. The doing exhausts the activity. The father makes clear that this is how he understands the good life. Not acting thus not only means that one is not virtuous, but that one will fail to be a human being. These are the conditions for a good human life on the slippery earth.

Thus, three separate metaphors about the good life—falling on the slippery earth, strongly rooted trees that provide shelter, and learning to stand on one’s feet—support the view that even if the poems attributed to Nezahualcoyotl really discuss truth, they stand in a metaphorical space permeated by rootedness. The related uses of truth as going to the roots certainly look apt in this context. Nevertheless, because the present analysis is premised on a philosophical approach to rootedness, there may be a philosophical objection to it. I’d like to consider one such objection.

THE WAY
One possible objection to the foregoing analysis might try to reconceive the Nahua’s conception of the good life not as one where one learns to stand on one’s feet or takes root on the slippery earth. It might instead be conceptualized as the way.
Even though the objection runs the risk of making the Nahuas into Daoists, there is some textual basis for it. Consider the following statement by the father speaking to his young son in the large discourse addressed above which touches on standing on one’s feet. The father states,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inic teíxco, teicpac tinemiz, inic timóchocholtiz, inic timoquaquahitz, inic timonmacinticiz in hochtlí, in maazatí yohui; inic timócalaquíz qaahuátlí, in zacatí intlácamo ticcuiz, intlácamo ticanaz in nanoytlí, in tayotí, intlácamo ticmocacacananiquíz.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living thus in front of and on top of the people [i.e., disrespectfully], in that way you will flee, you will become a monster, you will follow the way of the rabbit and deer; you will enter the forest, the overgrowth if you do not receive, do not accept what is your mother’s and your father’s, if you do not listen.</td>
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The father here suggests that there are two ways to live. One path, ohtli, is to live with people in cities. The other ohtli is to live like the rabbit and deer, in the forest and the overgrowth. Perhaps, then, what the Nahuas commend is not a life where one learns to stand on one’s feet, but a view where excellence consists in following the (human) way.

In reply, I think the discussion here is compatible with the broader view of the good life as the rooted life. In fact, it approximates the early Greek understanding of justice in a general sense. In Homer’s Odyssey, for example, when Penelope reminds her servants what a good master Odysseus was, she brings up two points in his favor: that he was never cruel and that he did not play favorites. She concludes this assessment saying, he acted “as is the dikē of lords.” In this case dikē means the way or manner of those who behave well, as nobles do. In a different context, Hippocrates, describing a disease, writes that “death does not follow these symptoms in the course of the disease so as not to fall on our slippery earth—or at least not to fall so often. The constellation of metaphors that supports this view link falling to imprudence and standing to prudence. Additionally, they speak of an ideal human being as a strongly rooted tree, the ceiba and the ahuehuete, that can provide shelter for others. Finally, fathers instruct their sons, mothers their daughters, that they must learn to stand on their feet and that this involves learning to live well with others. Even if rootedness is not explicitly designated in these discussions, the metaphor is nonetheless apt.

Having recalled that there is both a general conception of justice among virtue ethicists and that justice is, even in the “West,” a metaphorical notion drawn from following the path, it becomes clearer that in their discussion of the path, the Nahuas had something similar in mind. In fact, in just the next paragraph after the one quote on the path, the father develops his ideas in this direction explicitly. He states that by living well, “IC HUEL TETOC, TENAHUAUC TIONEMENITLZI / THUS YOU WILL LIVE NEXT TO AND SIDE PEOPLE.” The path in Nahuia ethics, then, is not the goal of a life well led, but a virtue for living well with others generally. Although it is not exactly what Aristotle and Plato recover from early Greek thought, it is recognizably understood as an articulation of justice in its general sense.

RECONSIDERING NELTILIZTLI

This essay began with a worry which stemmed from a rather obscure discussion among linguists. The question of whether nelli has any etymological connection with terms for roots nelhuatl and nelhuayotl. This specialized discussion has generalized implications. For if there is no linguistic connection between these terms, then not only is Miguel León-Portilla’s translation of the xochicuicatl inaccurate, but there is no firm foundation for the view that the Nahuas had a view of the good life as a rooted life. It may be, of course, that the Nahuas conceived of the good life as only a true life. This might tilt their ethics to one centered primarily on enlightenment.

In response, I have argued that the metaphorical space surrounding terms used for the good life still fit the sense of rootedness. A more careful analysis of the semantic terms related to nelhuayotl reveals that there is a recorded sense of “going to the roots” as truth. This is also consistent with James Maffe’s claim that Nahuas epistemology is more way-seeking than proposition-verifying. The semantic connection is not weak, then, even if it is not overwhelmingly strong. The main difficulty is that the morphological connection between the terms is mysterious. It is also unclear if the evidence needed to clarify that mystery will ever be forthcoming.

My approach, then, has been to shift evidentiary registers. For philosophical purposes, I have argued, there is substantial evidence that the Nahuas conceived of the good life as one where a human being learns to take root so as not to fall on our slippery earth—or at least not to fall so often. The constellation of metaphors that supports this view link falling to imprudence and standing to prudence. Additionally, they speak of an ideal human being as a strongly rooted tree, the ceiba and the ahuehuete, that can provide shelter for others. Finally, fathers instruct their sons, mothers their daughters, that they must learn to stand on their feet and that this involves learning to live well with others. Even if rootedness is not explicitly designated in these discussions, the metaphor is nonetheless apt.

I would like, now, to take a step further and bolster the semantic connection between these metaphors and truth in the following way. In Nahuatl, the term nelli is principally translated as “true” or “true.” Abstract terms, however, are unlikely to emerge from nothing. They tend to be metaphors derived from homier and more tangible
contexts. In English one might say “I am feeling up,” using a directional metaphor to express a positive emotion. The expression “time flies” uses motion as metaphor to express the experience of the passage of time. Similarly, one might exclaim “I’ve never been able to grasp transfinite numbers,” and so use an experience of object manipulation as a metaphor for intellectual comprehension. Might nelii, then, have a similar homier context? It seems likely. And I think that semantic evidence is found in the extended cases where nelhuayotl is linked to truth as verification, as the activity of going to the roots.

If any of the foregoing proves reasonably accurate, then the abstract verbal sense of acting to find the truth, neltiliztli, might still be the best single term for the good life among the Nahuas. One great difficulty, in this regard, is that the Nahuas resisted using single terms to express important notions. It is our contemporary desire for one term, a cultural bias, that pushes us in this direction. Having noted this caveat, the term neltiliztli is consistent with the Nezahualcoyotl passages about the good life. This life is, at least in part, the true life. Yet, the term might also act as a placeholder for the larger metaphorical universe about standing on one’s feet, guarding against falling down, and growing roots to provide shelter. It proves no terrible stretch, as a result, to suppose that neltiliztli might carry an additional ethical sense: taking root on the slippery earth. This is the true life, the best performance of our lives, danced on the world’s stage.

NOTES
3. These may be different for an author, as one may serve as a subordinator and another a demonstrative pronoun. Most commonly, however, they are both written “in.”
4. As far as understand his position, León-Portilla died defending the view that these were Nezahualcoyotl’s actual poems, remembered over centuries and eventually recorded. John Bierhorst Lee’s The Allure of Nezahualcoyotl: Pre-Hispanic History, Religion, and Nahua Poetics (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008) presented substantial evidence undermining that claim. James Lockhart presented the more moderate view, and did much earlier, that they could not be attributed to a single individual with certainty in The Nahua After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 392–401. Camilla Townsend defends the use of a variety of historical sources that Lee had argued were entirely compromised, including Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s history, in Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 223-24. And in the “introduction” to the more recent reconsideration of Nezahualcoyotl and his historical sources, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl and His Legacy, edited by Galen Brokaw and Jongsoo Lee (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 3–28, Lee appears to have moderated his view.
6. I ask my fellow nahuatlers some latitude on these terms, for the moment: While it is true that “nelhuatl” is the standardly conceived nominal form, for the sake of simplicity in the presentation, I have preferred to use the term which Remi Simeón records. For those who do not have a good understanding of Nahuatl, this will prove easier to navigate, and those of you who do will not be troubled by my shifting between “nelhuatl” and “nelhuayotl.”
7. None of this has appeared in publication, but it has emerged as a point of discussion among James Maffie, Joe R. Campbell, and me over email and in person. David Bowles also expressed a concern like Campbell’s to me in another email discussion. The community is small, so that this essay, in part, my attempt to get this matter into broader circulation.
9. Miguel León-Portilla, of course, makes his case for the philosophic character of the Nahua in his La filosofía náhuatl: Estudiada en sus fuentes (Mexico City: Instituto de investigaciones antropológicas UNAM, 1993 [1956]). He develops this further in chapter eleven, devoted to education, in Aztecas- Mexicans: Desarrollo de una civilización originaria (Madrid: Alcalba, 2005).
10. Huehuehtlahltli: Testimonios de la antigua palabra, Recogidos por fray Andrés de Olmos hacia 1535, Introduction by Miguel León-Portilla, translated and transilterated into Spanish by Librado Silva Galeana (Mexico City: Fondo de cultura económica, 1991), paragraph 55, page 330. Hereafter abbreviated as huehuehtlahltli followed by the paragraph number and page number. The translation accepts Silva Galeana’s correction of “immitzin” for “immitztin.” Note also that the author of this text often elided “in” with the following word as “im.”
12. This is the main thesis of the second chapter of Miguel León-Portilla’s La filosofía náhuatl.
14. Rémi Siméon, Diccionario de la lengua Nahualt o mexicana, translated by Josefin Olvia De Coll (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Press, 1981). Translations into English are my own. Although Siméon’s entry is largely like his, his additional wondering about the root term makes it a useful starting point for discussion.
15. Notably, Karttunen puzzles over this use in her entry for “nelhuayotl.”
17. Florentine Codex, 6.41, 228.
20. This is a form of address that is polite and common when nobles address each other. There may be no actual familial relationships at work.
21. This is a disfrazismo used in explicitly ethical contexts that closely approximates what is intended by the virtue of practical wisdom.
xi-mimati xi-mixtili. The first term concerns wisdom derived from experienced practice—deftness. The second concerns the awareness of adjusting one’s sensibilities to one’s surroundings.

22. Primeros Memoriales, 10, 295, fol. 70r.

23. I would like to thank Steven Broyles for helping me in identifying excellent specimens of these trees, and for lending me his knowledge as a tree biologist.

24. See, for example, where Aristotle speaks of magnanimity as the crown of the virtues, Nicomachean Ethics IV.3, 1124a1-2. Notably, and like Aristotle’s description, the Aztec description ties the conception to nobility. The difference is that the connection is even more direct for the Aztecs, as the man described is one who wears all the ornaments of a king. For the present ethical reconstruction, I will be careful to develop the framework in a way that does not commit it logically to this aristocratic outlook.


26. Olmos, Huehuehtlalcoli, 100, 386.

27. Olmos, Huhuehtlachioli, 25, 300.


37. Olmos, Huhuehtlachioli, 33, 308.

38. Perhaps Joe R. Campbell and I disagree on this point. I do not think he considered the way in which nelhuayotl, when connected with specific verbs, does mean something very much like truth.

39. This is, of course, the whole point of the now well-regarded literature of embodied cognition. Most of the examples that follow are taken from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 49-54.

1. Experience learning tells us learning, being, and knowledge are transformative, dynamic, and living.

Experiential learning of our experiential world tells us our world is a dynamic and living place, and the being and knowledge of this experiential world are dynamic and living. Knowledge of our living relations transform with geography and seasons. This creates an ongoing history of emergent and always emerging relational knowledge transformations. For example, if I am going to go hunt, I will need my geographic and seasonal hunting knowledge to be predictable and relate to that particular natural world. I want my experience with the world to be of that world as a metaphysically unified practical experience. I want this so that my hunt will be predictable and successful. Each living being, both myself as hunter, as well as the hunted, experience in a place, and that place is embodied with a history of relations and relational being(s). Both the hunter and hunted, as well as all other living beings in that place, share responsibility for respectful action. To know this place, as predictable, I need to show proper respect for self and all my relations in this place. I must have the best knowledge I can of what maintains balance, or harmony of relations in this place. I want this in order for a continuity of relations to remain without harm to that living world, for life is sacred. In this sense this dynamic and interactive worldview is at the core of my individual and communal identity. This Native American identity and its incumbent dynamic and living knowledge, frequently metaphorical, is a sacred issue for Native American and Mother Earth survival. This would be so for all physical and metaphysical relations in this place, in our cosmos.

Suppose I see the hunted move into a dark area of the valley forest where our hunters seldom visit. If I as hunter wish to follow it there, then I will need to be guided by a metaphysical principle that all sacred life is related. As such it is within a context of dynamic and emergent natural law received and developed by and for survival means. For success, sustainability, and survival of my community and myself, I will need to know my relations with being of this place. To know this place, as hunter, for me, is to have experiential knowledge of practical and sacred hunting relations in this particular place (environment). It is to know the dynamic and emergent forces of life in this place. Such knowledge is sacred to personal and community survival as it preserves being. Now let us consider the philosopher as hunter, and the doing of philosophy, by analogy.

If I am hunting knowledge of academic philosophy, and I plan to enter a predominantly European American worldview-oriented academic institution to study philosophy, I will need to know about the relations of being in that place. I will need to know whether and how I will be able to search for and find sacred living philosophical knowledge of being that I seek in that place. If I do not understand the experiential relations of being and time in that environmental place, then I must want to seek to learn them, or not go there, lest I fail prey to become the hunted. Importantly, I will need to understand whether what passes

Sacred Metaphysics and Core Philosophical Tenets of Native American Thought: Identity (Place, Space), Shared History (Place, Time), and Personality (Sacred Emergence of Relations)

Anne Schulherr Waters
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

What might a Native American trained at the highest levels of academic philosophy in the USA say about Native American Philosophy in 2021? I respond to this query in the context of what I, a Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Seminole woman, and a woman of Jewish descent, ponder from my experience.
as knowledge in this place is not static, but lives in and through the living being (and beings) of the academic institution. This is because I believe that all knowledge is emergent and dynamic. So I want to remember that all this that passes as knowledge therein is dynamic and living. And what counts as sacred, life, in this place, arises from interaction of worldview and relations as lived over much time and space. I want my learning, being, and knowledge to be transformative, dynamic, and living.

2. Knowledge is not value-free.

Knowledge cannot be value-free, nor can any Native American science, for they are both produced toward the survival purpose of need-to-know relations in a place or galaxy (environment or cosmos), across linear or meaning time (historical or cyclical), or among particular personalities (all my relations). Understanding identity of particular relations, for me, results from experiential knowledge of living personality as it continually comes to be, and manifests itself to me, over place and time. Native American knowledge and action within the context of living relations is pragmatic first in place and time. Pragmatic because its purpose is of survival meaning. My communal environmental survival relations maintain and sustain an ever-transforming world. Importantly, that world must remain in balance or harmony for myself and my people to survive. I am because we are, and if my sacred knowledge of life does not maintain the balance or harmony of our world, I understand that we, the human people, will not be able to continue. Because I value life as sacred, I understand the purposeful aspect of knowledge. I understand this world to be ecological (in located place), practical (pragmatically effective), and moral (valuing of respectful cyclical relations). Such knowing need not be unchanging and can carry a variety of different pragmatic observations over time and place, such as: “The sun comes up and we get warm,” or “The moon appears larger and women have bodily reproductive changes,” or “The deer go into the darkness and they escape our arrows.” My knowledge and understanding of these metaphysical facts come from my family and community, from my own valued experience of hunting (in academe), as well as my lifetime of accumulated literal and metaphorical learning about our world. It is of survival value for me to have this knowledge, and it is sacred knowledge, not value-free. This sacred, valued worldview is at the common core of Native American community and life. Knowledge is not value-free.

3. Metaphysics is ecological, sacred of place and time.

Such knowledge is ecological because the sun coming up or warming me is so only in some places at some times, and sacred because women respond sometimes differently to moon cycles over long stretches of time and place, because our bodies are by practice and spirit attuned over time and experience to the pull of galactic forces. This bringing to us warmth, and pulling of our bodies, experientially, tells us we are related to (in relations with) other being(s) in this place, and in our cosmos. Before we follow a deer into the darkness we must already know, by experience (and her sister, intuition), whether it is good to retreat from the valley following the deer tracks in this way. Alternatively, we may stand back and respect the being that follows the emergent natural law of survival. Whether I follow or not may depend upon my intent and need for reciprocity with the deer. Respectful action, in this way, may lead me to success in my hunt IF I know the cyclical and practical relations within the forest (and my relationship needs to those relations at a given time). My success is not dependent upon my beliefs, but upon my knowledge of relations in that place and space over time, understanding that what is true of place though retained in memory may change over time. This knowledge is gleaned over time via experience and experiential metaphor, as that metaphor (story, ritual, dance) operates in my life over time. My belief that I ought to follow the deer will not alone bring me the pragmatic practical success of my survival. I must have metaphysical knowledge of relations in this place and time to survive, and over time, to survive well.

Climate changes or galactic changes may affect the warmth of the sun; a violent war may affect the reproductive cycles of women; and a violent danger or disease may affect our knowledge of whether it is good to follow the deer into the valley of the dark forest. In this way Native American metaphysics is intimately born from, tied to, connected with, or related to the sun and moon, to pragmatics of deer in dark places, to reproductive activity, and to survival information. In this way my experiential learning and metaphorical learning in this time and place lead my way and provide insight into my actions. This knowledge as knowing sacred, sometimes metaphorical survival metaphysics, is sacred to me, for without it, I and others may not exist. Nor is it value-free, for it is the most valuable knowledge toward my, and my community’s, survival. We see here how the metaphorical knowledge of hunting, as manifested in perhaps song, dance, or other ritual, is sacred and malleable (and yes, ever emergent) through time and space. Thus, my need to act upon shared knowledge makes my worldview of the universe I/we live in a moral acting. I do what is right, or correct, according to my emergent communal survival pragmatic and metaphorical meaning worldview. This is a pragmatic respect of moral relations. It is a metaphysics ecological, sacred of place and time.

4. Metaphysics takes on belief practices and suspended judgment toward balance.

Over time this metaphysical (allegorical and metaphorical) information takes on some belief practices in our bodies and memory as they successfully predict for us survival activity. This metaphysical understanding of all relations is the glue of our communities, families, kinship, minds (all our relations); they hold us together. And because they present pragmatically successful beliefs for us (pragmatically true), they become good metaphysical beliefs for us so long as place and relations remain connected and affecting all our relations in our universe in respectful ways over time. They are sacred beliefs because they protect life. They are moral beliefs because we act upon information that will bring about our value of sacred balance, a good in our universe. Aside from heat, dinner, children, elders, all things assisting in the survival of our species, including maintenance of balanced relations among living beings, our actions, intimately connected to our metaphysical beliefs,
need to show respectful understanding of our kinship, of an interconnected universe. This analysis suggests it is important to act upon the good of relations that maintain a balance of life and species preservation, or harmonic relations, within the universe. A good hunt is a sacred hunt because it is balanced by respect and knowledge, and it continues life. This metaphysical balance of being located in our place, a place of knowing and feeling predictability of respectful interactions and relations over time, is a Native American good. This balance leads us to the good red road, a place Native Americans talk about.

A Native American metaphysics is one of place (ecology), complexity (anomalies count and may show a new way), emergence (things change in places), aliveness (seasonal), and morality (changes toward purpose and respect for and in balanced accord with all things in the universe changing). Such a metaphysic respects all relations in our universe. It is a pragmatic metaphysic, able to transform over time and place. Its depth and organization show our complex metaphysical moral realm of respect for life. It presents to us a possibility of survival at times in a suspended judgment understanding that all knowledge is emergent and interpretive over time and place. In this way Native American metaphysics takes on belief practices and suspended judgment toward balance.

5. Morality is pragmatic among dependent human beings.

Pragmatic truths of Native American metaphysics are born out of observation and experience alongside a moral (sacred) sense of being in the world, simply because we are all related to all being of the universe, and being and life are sacred, as active agents. Dan Wildcat puts it this way: “we human beings, in all our rich diversity, are intimately connected and related to, in fact dependent on, the other living beings, land, air, and water of the earth’s biosphere. Our continued existence as part of the biology of the planet is inextricably bound up with the existence and welfare of the other living beings and places of the earth: beings and places, understood as persons possessing power, not objects.” Hence, morality is pragmatic among dependent human beings.

6. Experience of relations becomes sacred knowledge.

This sense of being and emergent reality in the world arises from our experience—in awe and wonder we observe creation’s ongoing power and how we are related in this metaphysic, in what we might call a spiritual, or sacred way. This view of the lifeworld stands in contrast to inspired mechanistic views, and various religious views, that sometimes describe or bemoan our species as the output of an abstract master builder. A Native American religion is one of sacred knowledge and practice, experience, and respect for all our relations in the cosmos, one of a metaphysical and cosmological balance (harmony); it is particular, it is personal, it is sacred, and it is related to all.

In a Native American worldview, a metaphysical relation becomes sacred by human experience rather than human proclamation, declaration, or precept. In the process of a lived experiential relationship something as simple as corn, and the tending to corn, is sacred because of an inherent power (living energy of our universe), place (environment, sacred balanced relations of things to each other), and personality (personal purpose properties). Vine Deloria tells us that power and place equals personality, and personality is about properties and personal moral relations. It is about completing (maturing) purpose within the universe. “The broader Indian idea of relationship, in a universe that is very personal and particular, suggests that all relationships have a moral content.” Completing our particular relationships in experience as we mature matters to our community, family, and personal survival. Completions of maturity matter.

It is sacred knowledge that brings us (unifies our intimate understanding) to recognize metaphysical properties that feed life, community, and self. In this way we make survival sense of the world we live in. Our understanding becomes unified through our experience, through maturity. As humans tend the corn, if thereby enriches (sustains) our life and that of our environment as it is carefully sown in a sacred cyclical manner. These interactions create consistent balanced patterns of relations of power (energy), in particular places and times, under particular conditions. Humans are required to cultivate and create the corn’s emergence into the physical world (place), yet the corn is also required by its purpose (personality) upon maturity, to strengthen our bodies, thereby enriching and fulfilling our lives and our relations with corn. Similarly do we understand the hunting of deer, other activities, and human relations, and harmony of being(s).

Currently, most academic Native American philosophers have been at least in some ways culturally assimilated into the dominant philosophical academic societies, culture’s influence, and colonial education institutions. They have studied alleged colonial “universal truths” as though they were their own (or the only) history of ideas, yet knowing differently. Our own tribal knowledge teach us to respect our own traditions of personal experiential learning and seemingly anomalous information. Vine Deloria explains the nature of how concepts of “power” and “place” help to define for Native American philosophers principles of Native American forms of knowledge:

Keeping the particular in mind as the ultimate reference point of Indian knowledge, we can pass into a discussion of some of the principles of the Indian forms of knowledge. Here power and place are dominant concepts—power being the living energy that inhabits and/or composes the universe, and place being the relationship of things to each other. . . . Power and place produce personality . . . . the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner. . . . The broader Indian idea of relationship, in a universe that is very personal and particular, suggests that all relationships have a moral content. This sense of sharing personal relationships suggests for Deloria that all relationships have a moral content, and that “knowledge of our universe cannot be separated from other sacred knowledge about ultimate spiritual relations.” Oral traditions of Native American stories explain about
these relations and the human role in helping to mature and complete relationships of our world and the universe. To act in consonance with the nature/personality of the universe and all things in it, the Native American moral personality considers all possible known and intuited effects of our actions in that moral universe. This is sacred metaphysics in action, and may be metaphorical in learning and practice. It is pragmatic. Relationships are personal, particular, and sacred; they are moral. Places create relationship, and these relationships make for morality in the Native American worldview. Experience of relations becomes sacred knowledge.

7. Sacred metaphysics requires completion/maturity.

When Deloria tells us that “power” and “place” produce personality, he means for us to understand that because we must seek out and sustain personal relationship in nature, in our universe, as we move through and interact within that universe, our universe for us is a personal one that exhibits a particular personality of moral content, or a sense of duty. This duty is simply to do our fair share to maintain the universe in balance as best we can. We do this in order to complete relationships necessitated by attention to the effects of our actions upon those harmonic relations of sustainability. Thus the need for a healthy “suspended judgment” in our thoughts about the world lest we lose balance of relations.

Thus, if we are respecting those affected by our actions, and their personalities’ completion, we cooperatively create and maintain our personal relationships throughout time (on a continuum of cyclical growth experience) and of place (environmental source of knowledge). Time in this sense can be measured by our actual experiences in and with the world, in cycles of power (universe energy) and place (relationships of being to one another) as we mature. In this way we develop a personality (metaphysic) of how things function in the world based upon the completion of relationships, for example, the time for the corn to ripen and how the squash and beans might respond to that power (energy) and place (effects of relationships one upon another), and our nourishment made possible by fulfilling our relations with the corn. The growing corn ripens, and its attendant squash and beans may be understood as a metaphor of nature’s balance and sustainability. Time is cycles of power and energy in places, bearing out relationships to being; as we mature we develop a personality (metaphysic) of how things are in the world, and as we complete relationships we mature. So just as the corn ripens, so also particular relations and relationships are fulfilled as the cycles of life continue.

This means that when ‘a’ happens and then ‘b’ happens, the sequential relationship is not a set of cause-and-effect principles, but a guide to the psychological behavior (open predictability) of plants, or animals, or other living being. This Native American philosophy seeks to understand how power (energy) and place (relations) produce personality (personal moral context of relations), such that a bear may embody relations of medicine, an owl relations of death, and snakes as anticipating thunderstorms.

Power and place produce personality because our natural world is personal (because of relations), and our perceived relationships are ethical (because they participate to create or fulfill purpose-maturity). Sacred metaphysics requires completion/maturity.

8. To be human is to participate in and complete sacred metaphysical relations.

Humans are involved in these relations and all have a role to play in the functioning of our natural world. In this context of relations and being, time becomes the growth and fruition of all things toward their maturity as they fulfill personal particular moral relations in the universe. In this way alongside the physical form of our universe (matter) as it appears to us, lies a spiritual universe of personality comprising ethical relationships. And in this way bear, owl, and snake learning knowledge and relations become for us sacred knowledge and relations. And they maintain their metaphorical power in story. Importantly, knowledge of such relations requires experiential verification, not logical proof. Experience and verification is but one way of learning. Our universe is not merely a universe of matter, but one that is ever-changing to us and spiritually lives within us over time and maturity, and in this way has come to exert certain physical forms we observe as it moves toward an ever-changing maturity.

Put simply, “the energy described by quantum physics appears to be identical to the mysterious power that almost all tribes accepted as the primary constituent of the universe.” For Native Americans, what is, in our world we live in, requires a sense of suspended judgment, for all things seemingly change in our universe over time and place. In this way our metaphors remain open and malleable, able to express our sacred knowledge as it emerges over time and our knowledge of the universe. Metaphysically, then, the universe shares in spiritual likeness of the world we live in: personal; particular; complex; emerging; of experience; relational; moral; pragmatic; and changing. Because for us our universe is seemingly ever-changing, and for us we retain our suspended judgments of science, hold fast to our particular experience, and stand in awe and wonder, as we bask in the metaphysics of wonder, respect, and hope for sustainable tools of survival at our disposal. While at the same time, we remain attuned to our metaphysical relationships and obligations of our ever-situated family of moral relations in the universe. We understand that life being changes in sacred and pragmatic ways, over time and place, while we remain among all our particular relations in our galaxies. To be human is to participate in and complete sacred metaphysical relations. Mitakuye Oyasin.

NOTES

2. Deloria and Wildcat, 23.
3. Deloria and Wildcat, 22-23.
4. Deloria and Wildcat, 23.
5. Deloria and Wildcat, 23.
6. Deloria and Wildcat, 27.

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